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CHARLOTTE'S INHERITANCE

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "BIRDS OF PREY,"

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

LONDON

WARD, LOCK, AND TYLER

WARWICK HOUSE, PATERNOSTER ROW

1868

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Book the Seventh *(continued)*.

A FIGHT AGAINST TIME.

CHAPTER III.

THE SORTES VIRGILIANÆ.

WHILE George Sheldon was still in the depths of the City, Valentine Hawkehurst arrived at the Gothic Villa, where he asked to see Mrs. Woolper. Of the woman herself he knew very little; he had seen her once or twice when some special mission brought her to the drawing-room; and from Charlotte he had heard much of her affectionate solicitude. To have been kind to his Charlotte was the strongest claim to his regard.

"This woman's help would be of inestimable service," he thought; "her age, her experience of sickness, her familiarity with the patient, especially adapt her for the office she will be required to fill. If Dr. Jedd should order a nurse to watch by the sick-bed, here is the nurse. If it should prove possible to remove the dear sufferer, here

were the guardian best calculated to protect and attend her removal." That the desperate step of an immediate marriage would be a wise step, Valentine could not doubt, since it would at once annihilate Mr. Sheldon's chances, and destroy his motive. But in contemplating this desperate step Valentine had to consider the reputation as well as the safety of his future wife. He was determined that there should be no opportunity for scandal in the circumstances of his stolen marriage; no scope for future mischief from the malignity of that baffled villain, to whose schemes their marriage would give the death-blow. He, who from his cradle had been familiar with the darker side of life, knew how often the innocent carry a life-long burden, and perform a perpetual penance for the sins or the follies of others. And over his darling's life in the future, should it please God that he might save her, he would have no shadow cast by imprudence of his in the present.

"This sharp-witted, sharp-tongued Yorkshire-woman will be the woman of women to protect

her," he thought, as he seated himself in Mr. Sheldon's study, whither the prim parlour-maid had ushered him.

"Mrs. Woolper have just gone up-stairs to clean herself," she said; "which we are a having the dining-room and droring-room carpets up, while the family are away. Would you please to wait?"

Valentine looked at his watch.

"I cannot wait very long," he said; "and I shall be obliged if you will tell Mrs. Woolper that I wish to see her on very important business."

The parlour-maid departed, and Valentine was left to endure the weariness of waiting until Mrs. Woolper should have "cleaned herself."

Mr. Sheldon's study at Bayswater did not offer much more to the eye of the investigator than Mr. Sheldon's office in the City. There were the handsomely-bound books behind the inviolable plate-glass doors, and there was the neat writing-table with the machine for weighing letters, and the large business-like looking blotting-pad, and the ponderous brass-rimmed ink-

stand, with no nonsense about it; and yonder, on a clumsy little oak-table with thick legs, appeared the copying-machine, with a big black iron lever, and a massive screw with which to screw all the spontaneous feeling out of every letter that came beneath its crushing influence.

Up and down this joyless den Valentine Hawkehurst paced, with the demon of impatience raging in his breast. The July sunshine blazed hot upon the window, and the voices of croquet-players in adjacent gardens rose shrill upon the summer air. And there were girls playing croquet, while she, his "rose of the garden, garden of girls," lay sick unto death! O, why could he not offer a hecatomb of these common creatures as a substitute for that one fair spirit?

He looked into the garden—the prim modern garden, but a few years reclaimed from that abomination of desolation, the "eligible lot of building land." Across the well-kept lawn there brooded no shadow of old-world cedar, no century-old espaliers divided flower and kitchen ground, no box-edging of the early Hanoverian era bor-

dered the beds of roses and mignonette. From one boundary-wall to the other there was not a bush old enough to hang an association upon. The stereotyped bed of flaming yellow calceolaria balanced the conventional bed of flaming crimson verbena; the lavender heliotrope faced the scarlet geranium, like the four corners in a quadrille. The garden was the modern nurseryman's ideal of suburban horticulture, and no more. But to Valentine this half-acre of smooth lawn and Wimbledon gravel pathway had seemed fair as those pleasure-gardens of Semiramis, at the foot of the Bagistanos mountain, the fame whereof tempted Alexander to turn aside from the direct road, during his march from Chelone to the Nysaïc horse-pastures.

To-day the contemplation of that commonplace garden gave him direful pain. Should he ever walk there again with his dear love, or in any other garden upon earth?

And then he thought of fairer gardens, in supernal regions whither his soul was slow to travel. "Not easy is the journey from earth to

the stars," says the sage; and from this young wanderer the stain of earthly travel had yet to be washed away.

"If she is taken from me, shall I ever be pure enough to follow her?" he asked himself. "Will a life that began in such darkness ever rise to the light which is her natural element? If she is taken, and I stay behind, and bear my burden patiently in the hope to follow her, will there not be a gate closed against me in the skies, beyond which I shall see her, shining among her kindred spirits, in the white robes of perfect innocence? Ah, my love, my love, as between us on this earth must for ever be a gulf your pure soul cannot pass, so between us in the skies will rise a barrier to sever me from your sweet company!"

The thought of probable separation upon earth, of possible separation in heaven, was too bitter to him.

"I will not think of these things," he said to himself; "I will not believe in the possibility of this sacrifice. Ah, no! she will be saved. Against that bright young life the awful fiat has

not gone forth. Providence has been with me to-day. Providence will go with me till the end."

He thought how other men had so stood as he was standing now, face to face with the great uncertainty, the crisis, the turning-point — the pivot on which life itself revolved. The pendulum of the mighty clock swings solemnly to and fro; with every vibration a moment; with every moment each man's shrouded fates move another step in their inexorable progress. And the end? What was the goal towards which those dark relentless shapes were moving?

He thought of Rousseau, balancing the awful question of his soul's salvation; his poor weak soul adrift upon a sea of doubt.

"Behold yonder tree which faces me, as I sit and meditate the problem of my destiny—the destiny of me, Jean Jacques Rousseau, self-conscious genius, and future regenerator of my age. I pick up a pebble, and poise it between my fingers before taking my aim. In another moment the question will be answered. If the pebble hits the tree, I, Jean Jacques, am reserved

for salvation. If I miss—O awful, overwhelming possibility!—my name will blaze upon that dreadful scroll which numbers the damned."

Happily the tree is bulky, and within but a few yards of the speculator, and the great enigma of the Calvinistic church is answered in favour of Madame de Warenne's protégé, whose propensities and proclivities at that period did not very strongly indicate his claim to a place among the elect.

Valentine remembered the *sortes Virgilianæ*—the Wesleyan's drawing of inferences from Bible texts. Ah, could he not find an answer to the question that was the one thought of his mind? He would find some answer — a lying oracle, perhaps. It might be a voice from heaven. Some temporary assuagement of this storm of doubt that raged in his breast. "I doubt if Mr. Sheldon owns either a Bible or an *Æneid*," he said to himself, as he stopped in his rapid pacing of the room; "I will open the first book I can put my hand upon, and from the first line my eye falls on will draw an augury."

He looked about the room. Behind the glazed doors of the mahogany bookcase appeared Hume and Smollett, Scott and Shakespeare; and conspicuous among these a handsome family Bible. But the glazed doors were locked. In Mr. Sheldon's study there appeared to be no other books than these few standard works. Yes, on some obscure little shelves, low down in one of the recesses formed by the projection of the fireplace and the chimney, there were three rows of large quarto volumes, in dingy dark-green cloth cases.

What these volumes might contain, Valentine Hawkehurst knew not: and the very fact of his ignorance rendered these books all the more suitable for the purpose of augury. To dip for a sentence into any of these unknown volumes would be a leap in darkness more profound than he could find in the Bible or the *Æneid*, where his own foreknowledge of the text might unwittingly influence the oracle. He went over to the recess, bent down, and ran his hand along the backs of the volumes, with his face turned away from the books towards the window.

"The first obstruction that arrests my hand shall determine my choice of the volume," he said to himself.

His hand ran easily along the volumes on the upper shelf—easily along the volumes on the second shelf; and he began to doubt whether this mode of determining his choice could be persisted in. But in its progress along the third and lowest range of volumes, his hand was arrested midway by a book which projected about half an inch beyond its fellows.

He took this book out and carried it to the table, still without looking at it. He opened it, or rather let its leaves fall open of their own accord—still without looking at it; and then, with a strange superstitious fear—mingled in his mind with the natural shame that accompanied his conscious folly—he looked at the page before him. The line on which he fixed his eyes was the heading of a letter. It was in larger type than the rest of the page, and it was very plain to him, as he stood a little way from the table looking down at the open book.

The line ran thus:

"On the Fallibility of Copper Gauze as a Test for the Detection of Arsenic."

The book was a volume of the *Lancet;* the date twenty years ago.

"What an oracle!" thought Valentine, with a cynical laugh at his own folly, and some slight sense of relief. In all feeble tamperings with powers invisible there lurks a sense of terror in the weak human heart. He had tempted those invisible ones, and the oracle he only half believed in might have spoken to his confusion and dismay. He was glad to think the line meant nothing.

And yet, even in this dryasdust title of a scientific communication from a distinguished toxicologist, there was some sinister significance. It was the letter of a great chemist, who demonstrated therein the fallibility of all tests in relation to a certain poison. It was one of those papers which, while they aid the cause of science, may also further the dark processes of the poisoner, by showing him the forces he has to encounter,

and the weapons with which he may defend himself from their power. It is needless to dwell here upon the contents of this letter—one of a series on the same subject, or range of subjects. Valentine read it with eager interest. For him it had a terrible importance in its relation to the past and to the present.

"I let the book fall open, and it opened at that letter," he thought to himself. "Will it open there a second time, I wonder?"

He repeated the experiment, and the book opened in the same place. Again; and again the book opened as before. Again, many times, and the result was still the same.

After this he examined the book, and found that it had been pressed open at this page, as by a reader leaning on the opened volume. He examined it still more closely, and found here and there on the page faint indications of a pencil, which had underscored certain lines, and the marks of which had been as far as possible erased. The deduction to be drawn from these small facts seemed only too clear to Valentine

Hawkehurst. By some one reader the pages had been deliberately and carefully studied. Could he doubt that reader to have been the man in whose possession he found the book, the man whom that very day he had heard plainly denounced as a poisoner?

He drew out the previous volume, and in this a rapid search revealed to him a second fact, significant as the last.

An old envelope marked the place where appeared an article on the coincidences common to the diagnostics of a certain type of low fever, and the diagnostics of a certain class of poisons. Here the volume again opened of itself, and a blot of ink on the page seemed to indicate that the open book had been leant upon by a person engaged in making memoranda of its contents. Nor was this all. The forgotten envelope that marked the place had its own dismal significance. The postmark bore the date of the year and the month in which Charlotte's father had died.

While this volume was still open in his hand

the door opened suddenly, and Mrs. Woolper came into the room.

She had kept Valentine waiting more than half an hour. He had little more than half an hour at most in which to break the ice of absolute strangeness, and sound the very depths of this woman's character. If she had come to him earlier, when his plan of action was clear and definite, his imagination in abeyance, he would have gone cautiously to work, with slowness and deliberation. Coming to him now, when his mind, unsettled by the discovery of fresh evidence against Philip Sheldon, was divided between the past and the present, she took him off his guard, and he plunged at once into the subject that absorbed all his thoughts.

Mrs. Woolper looked from Valentine to the open books on the table with a vague terror in her face.

"I am sorry I was so long, sir; but I'd been polishing the grates and fenders, and such like, and my hands and face were blacker than

a sweep's. I hope there's nothing wrong at the seaside, where Miss—"

"There is much that's wrong, Mrs. Woolper—hopelessly, irrecoverably wrong. Miss Halliday is ill, very ill—doomed to die, if she remain in your master's keeping."

"Lord help us, Mr. Hawkehurst! what do you mean?"

The terror in her face was no longer a vague terror. It had taken a form and substance; and was a terror unutterably hideous, if ever human countenance gave expression to human thought.

"I mean that your master is better skilled in the use of the agents that kill than the agents that cure. Charlotte's father came to Philip Sheldon's house a hale strong man, in the very prime of manhood. In that house he sickened of a nameless disease, and died, carefully tended by his watchful friend. The same careful watcher stands by Charlotte Halliday's deathbed, and she is dying!"

"Dying! O, sir, for God's sake, don't say that!"

"She is dying, as her father died before her, by the hand of Philip Sheldon."

"O, sir! Mr. Hawkehurst!" cried the old woman, with clasped hands lifted in piteous supplication towards her master's denouncer. "It's not true. It is not true. For God's dear love don't tell me it is true! I nursed him when he was a baby, sir; and there wasn't a little trouble I had to bear with him that didn't make him all the dearer to me. I have sat up all the night through, sir, times and often, when he was ill, and have heard Barlingford church-clock strike every hour of the long night; and O, if I had known that this could ever come to him, I should have wished him dead in the little crib where he lay and seemed so innocent. I tell you, sir, it can't be true. His father and mother had been respected and looked up to in Barlingford for many a year. His grandfather and grandmother before them. There isn't a name that stands better in those parts than the name

of Sheldon. Do you think such a man would poison his friend?"

"*I* said nothing about poison, Mrs. Woolper," said Valentine sternly.

This woman had known all, and had held her tongue like the rest, it seemed. To Valentine there was unutterable horror in the thought that a cold-blooded murder could be thus perpetrated in the sight of several people, and yet no voice be raised to denounce the assassin.

"And this is our modern civilisation!" he said to himself. "Give me the desert or the jungle. The sons of Bowanee are no worse than Mr. Sheldon, and one might be on one's guard against them."

Nancy Woolper looked at him aghast. He had said nothing about poison! What, then,—had she betrayed her master?

He saw that she had known, or strongly suspected, the worst, in the case of Tom Halliday: and that she would easily be influenced to do all he wanted of her.

"Mrs. Woolper, you must help me to save

Charlotte," he said with intensity. "You made no attempt to save her father, though you suspected the cause of his death. I have this day seen Mr. Burkham, the doctor who attended Mr. Halliday, and from his lips I have heard the truth. I want you to accompany me to Hastings, and to take your place by Charlotte's bed as her nurse and guardian. If Mr. Sheldon suspects your knowledge of the past, and I have little doubt that he does,"—a look in the housekeeper's face told him that he was right—"you are of all people best fitted to guard that dear girl. Your part will not be a difficult one. If we dare remove her, we will remove her beyond the reach of that man's power. If not, your task will be to prevent food or medicine, that his hand has touched, from approaching her lips. You *can* do it. It will only be a question of tact and firmness. We shall have one of the greatest doctors in London for our guide. Will you come?"

"I don't believe my master poisoned his friend," said Nancy Woolper doggedly; "nor I

won't believe it. You can't force me to think bad of him I loved when he was little and helpless, and I carried him in my arms. What are you and your fine London doctor, Mr. Burkham—he was but a poor fondy, as I mind well—that I should take your word against my master? If that young man thought as Mr. Halliday was being poisoned, why didn't he speak out, like a man, then? It's a fine piece of work to bring it up against my master eleven years afterwards. As for young missy, she's as sweet a young creature as ever lived, and I'd do anything to serve her. But I won't think, and I can't think, that my master would hurt a hair of her head. What would he gain by it?"

"He has settled that with himself. He has gained by the death of Tom Halliday, and depend upon it he has made his plans to gain by the death of Tom Halliday's daughter."

"I won't believe it," the old woman repeated in the same dogged tone.

For such resistance as this Mr. Hawkehurst was in no manner prepared. He looked at his

watch. The half-hour was nearly gone. There was little more time for argument.

"Great heaven!" he said to himself, "what argument can I employ to influence this woman's obdurate heart?"

What argument indeed? He knew of none stronger than those he had used. He stood for some moments baffled and helpless, staring absently at the face of his watch, and wondering what he was to do next.

As Valentine Hawkehurst stood thus, there came a loud ringing of the bell, following quickly on the sound of wheels grinding against the curb-stone.

Mrs. Woolper opened the door and looked out into the hall.

"It's master!" cried one of the maids, emerging from the disorganised dining-room, "and missus, and Miss Halliday, and Miss Paget,—and all the house topsy-turvy!"

"Charlotte here!" exclaimed Valentine. "You are dreaming, girl."

"And you told me she was dying!" said Mrs.

Woolper, with a look of triumph. "What becomes of your fine story now?"

"It *is* Miss Halliday!" cried the housemaid, as she opened the door. "And O my," she added, looking back into the hall with a sorrowful face, "how bad she do look!"

Valentine ran out to the gate. Yes; there were two cabs, one laden with luggage, the two cabmen busy about the doors of the vehicles, a little group of stragglers waiting to see the invalid young lady alight. It was the next best thing to a funeral.

"O, don't she look white!" cried a shrill girl with a baby in her arms.

"In a decline, I dessay, pore young thing," said a matron, in an audible aside to her companion.

Valentine dashed amongst the group of stragglers. He pushed away the girl with the baby, the housemaid who had run out behind him, Mr. Sheldon, the cabman, everyone; and in the next moment Charlotte was in his arms, and he was carrying her into the house.

He felt as if he had been in a dream; and all

that exceptional force which the dreamer sometimes feels he felt in this crisis. He carried his dear burden into the study, followed by Mr. Sheldon and Diana Paget. The face that drooped upon his shoulder showed deadly white against his dark-blue coat; the hand which he clasped in his, ah, how listless and feeble!

"Valentine!" the girl said, in a low, drowsy voice, lifting her eyes to his face, "is this you? I have been so ill, so tired; and they would bring me away. To be near the doctors, papa says. Do you think any doctors will be able to cure me?"

"Yes, dear, with God's help. I am glad he has brought you here. And now I must run away," he said, when he had placed Charlotte in Mr. Sheldon's arm-chair, "for a very little while, darling. I have seen a doctor, a man in whom I have more confidence than I have in Dr. Doddleson. I am going to fetch him, my dearest," he added tenderly, as he felt the feeble hand cling to his; "I shall not be long. Do you think I shall not hurry back to you? My dearest

one, when I return, it will be to stay with you—for ever."

She was too ill to note the significance of his words: she only knew that they gave her comfort. He hurried from the room. In less than an hour he must be at the London Bridge terminus, or in all probability the five-o'clock train would carry Dr. Jedd to St. Leonards; and on Dr. Jedd his chief hope rested.

"Do you believe me now?" he asked of Mrs. Woolper, as he went out into the hall.

"I do," she answered in a whisper; "and I will do what you want."

She took his hand in her wrinkled horny palm and grasped it firmly. He felt that in this firm pressure there was a promise sacred as any oath ever registered on earth. He met Mr. Sheldon on the threshold, and passed him without a word. The time might come in which he would have to mask his thoughts, and stoop to the hateful hypocrisy of civility to this man; but he had not yet schooled himself to do this. At the gate he met George Sheldon.

"What's up now?" asked the lawyer.

"Did you send your message?"

"Yes; I telegraphed to Phil."

"It has been trouble wasted. He has brought her home."

"What does that mean?"

"Who knows? I pray God that he may have overreached himself. I have set a watch upon my dear love, and no further harm shall come to her. I am going to fetch Dr. Jedd."

"And you are not afraid of Phil's smelling a rat?"

"I am afraid of nothing that he can do henceforward. If it is not too late to save her, I will save her."

He waited for no more, but jumped into the cab.

"London Bridge terminus! You must get me there by a quarter to five," he said to the driver.

George Sheldon went no further than the gate of his brother's domain.

"I wonder whether the Harold's-hill people

will send that telegram after him," he thought. "It'll be rather unpleasant for Fred Orcott if they do. But it's ten to one they won't. The normal condition of every seaside lodging-house-keeper is one degree removed from idiocy."

Book the Eighth.

THROUGH THE FURNACE.

CHAPTER I.

SOMETHING TOO MUCH.

"Is that young man mad?" asked Philip Sheldon, as he went into his study immediately after Valentine had passed him in the hall.

The question was not addressed to any particular individual: and Diana, who was standing near the door by which Mr. Sheldon entered, took upon herself to answer it.

"I think he is very anxious," she said in a half-whisper.

"What brought him here just now? He did not know we were coming home."

Mrs. Woolper answered this question.

"He came for something for Miss Charlotte, sir; some books as she'd had from the library. They'd not been sent back; and he came to see about their being sent."

"What books?" murmured Charlotte. But a pressure from Mrs. Woolper's hand prevented her saying more.

"I never encountered anyone with so little self-command," said Mr. Sheldon. "If he is going to rush in and out of my house in that manner, I must really put a stop to his visits altogether. I cannot suffer that kind of thing. For Charlotte's welfare quiet is indispensable; and if Mr. Hawkehurst's presence is to bring noise and excitement, Mr. Hawkehurst must not cross this threshold."

He spoke with suppressed anger; with such evident effort to restrain his anger, that it would have seemed as if his indignation against Valentine was no common wrath.

Charlotte caught his last words.

"Dear papa," she pleaded in her faint voice, "pray do not be angry with Valentine; he is so anxious about me."

"I am not angry with him; but while you are ill, I will have quiet—at any price."

"Then I'm sure you should not have brought

Charlotte home," exclaimed Georgy in tones of wailing and lamentation; "for of all the miseries in life, there is nothing worse than coming home in the very midst of a general cleaning. It was agreed between Ann Woolper and me that there should be a general cleaning while we were away at the seaside. We were to be away a fortnight, and everything was to be as neat as a new pin when we came home. But here we are back in less than a week, and everything at sixes and sevens. Where we are to dine I know not; and as for the carpets, they are all away at the beating-place, and Ann tells me they won't be home till Friday."

"We can exist without carpets," answered Mr. Sheldon in a hard dry voice. "I suppose they are seeing to Miss Halliday's room?" he added, addressing himself to Mrs. Woolper. "Why don't you go and look after them, Nancy?"

"Sarah knows what she has to do. The bedrooms was done first; and there's not much amiss in Miss Charlotte's room."

Mr. Sheldon dropped wearily into a chair. He

looked pale and haggard. Throughout the journey he had been unfailing in his attention to the invalid; but the journey had been fatiguing; for Charlotte Halliday was very ill—so ill as to be unable to avoid inflicting trouble upon others. The weariness—the dizziness—the dull intervals of semi-consciousness—the helpless, tottering walk, which was like the walk of intoxication rather than ordinary weakness—the clouded sight—all the worst symptoms of this nameless disease, had every hour grown more alarming.

Against this journey to London Mrs. Sheldon and Diana had pleaded—Georgy with as much earnestness as she could command; Diana as forcibly as she dared argue a question in which her voice had so little weight.

But upon this point Mr. Sheldon was adamant.

"She will be better off in London," he said resolutely. "This trip to the seaside was a whim of my wife's; and, like most other whims of my wife's, it has entailed trouble and expense upon me. Of course, I know that Georgy did it for

the best," he added, in reply to a reproachful "O, Philip!" from Mrs. Sheldon. "But the whole business has been a mistake. No sooner are we comfortably settled down here, than Hawkehurst takes it into his head to be outrageously alarmed about Charlotte, and wants to bring half-a-dozen doctors round the poor girl's bed, to her inevitable peril; for in an illness which begins and ends in mental depression, all appearance of alarm is calculated to do mischief."

Having said this, Mr. Sheldon lost no time in making arrangements for the journey. A carriage was ordered; all possible preparations were made for the comfort of the invalid—everything that care or kindness could do was done; but the cruelty of the removal was not the less obvious. Georgy wailed piteously about the sixes and sevens to which they were being taken. Diana cared nothing about sixes and sevens: but she felt supreme indignation against Charlotte's stepfather, and she did not attempt to conceal her feelings.

Nor was it without an effort to oppose Mr. Shel-

don's authority that Miss Paget succumbed to the force of circumstances. She appealed to his wife.

"Dear Mrs. Sheldon, I beg you not to suffer Lotta's removal," she said earnestly. "You do not know how ill she is—nor can Mr. Sheldon know, or he would not take such a step. As her mother, your authority is superior to his; you have but to say that she shall not be taken from this house in her present state of prostration and sickness."

"I have only to say!" cried Georgy piteously. "O, Diana, how can you say such a thing? What would be Mr. Sheldon's feelings if I were to stand up against him, and declare that Charlotte should not be moved? And he so anxious too, and so clever. I'm sure his conduct about my poor dear Lotta is positively beautiful. I never saw such anxiety. Why, he has grown ten years older in his looks since the beginning of her illness. People go on about stepfather this, and stepfather that, until a poor young widow is almost frightened to marry again. But I don't believe a real father ever was more thoughtful or

more careful about a real daughter, than Philip has been about Lotta. And what a poor return it would be, if I were to oppose him now, when he says that the removal will be for Charlotte's good, and that she will be near clever doctors—if she should require clever doctors! You don't know how experienced he is, and how thoughtful. I shall never forgot his kindness to poor Tom."

"Yes," exclaimed Miss Paget impatiently, "but Mr. Halliday died."

"O, Diana," whimpered Georgy, "I did not think you could be so unkind as to remind me of that."

"I only want to remind you that Mr. Sheldon is not infallible."

Mr. Sheldon entered the room at this juncture, and Diana left it, passionately indignant against the poor weak creature, to whom no crisis, no danger could give strength of mind or will.

"A sheep would make some struggle for her lamb," she thought angrily. "Mrs. Sheldon is lower than a sheep."

It was the first time she had thought unkindly of this weak soul, and her anger soon melted to pity for the powerless nature which Mr. Sheldon held in such supreme control. She made no further attempt at resistance after this; but went to Charlotte's room and prepared for the journey.

"O, why am I to be moved, dear?" the girl asked piteously. "I am too ill to be moved."

"It is for your good, darling. Mr. Sheldon wants you to be near the great physicians, who can give you health and strength."

"There are no physicians who can do that. Let me stay here, Di. Beg papa to let me stay here."

Diana hid her face upon the invalid's shoulder. Her tears choked her. To repress her grief was agony scarcely endurable. But she did hide all trace of anger and sorrow, and cheered the helpless traveller throughout the weariness of the journey.

Charlotte was lying on a sofa in her bed-

room, with Mrs. Woolper in attendance upon her, when Dr. Jedd arrived. It was a quarter to six, and the low western sunshine flooded the room.

The physician came with Valentine, and did not ask to see Mr. Sheldon before going to his patient's room. He told the housemaid who admitted him to show the way to Miss Halliday's room.

"The nurse is there, I suppose?" he said to the girl.

"Yes, sir; leastways Mrs. Woolper."

"That will do."

Mr. Sheldon heard the voice in the hall, and came out of the library as the doctor mounted the first step of the stairs.

"Who is this? What is this?" he asked of Valentine Hawkehurst.

"I told you I was not satisfied with Dr. Doddleson's opinion," answered the young man coolly. "This gentleman is here by appointment with me."

"And pray by what right do you bring a

doctor of your own choosing to visit my stepdaughter without previous consultation with me?"

"By the right of my love for her. I am not satisfied as to the medical treatment your stepdaughter has received in this house, Mr. Sheldon, and I want to be satisfied. Miss Halliday is something more than your stepdaughter, remember: she is my promised wife. Dr. Jedd's opinion will be more assuring to me than the opinion of Dr. Doddleson."

At the sound of Dr. Jedd's name Mr. Sheldon started slightly. It was a name he knew only too well—a name he had seen among the medical witnesses in the great Fryar trial, the record of which had for him possessed a hideous fascination. He had fancied himself in the poisoner Fryar's place; and the fancy had sent an icy chill through his veins. But in the next minute he had said to himself, "I am not such a reckless fool as that man Fryar was; and have run no such risks as he ran."

At the name of Jedd the same icy shiver ran through his veins again. His tone of suppressed

anger changed to a tone of civility, which was almost sycophantic.

"I have the honour to know Dr. Jedd by repute very well indeed, and I withdraw my objection to your course of proceeding, my dear Hawkehurst; though I am sure Dr. Jedd will agree with me that such a course is completely against all professional etiquette, and that Dr. Doddleson will have the right to consider himself aggrieved."

"There are cases in which one hardly considers professional etiquette. I shall be very happy to meet Dr. Doddleson to-morrow morning. But as Mr. Hawkehurst was very anxious that I should see Miss Halliday to-night, I consented to waive all ceremony, and come with him on the spot."

"I cannot blame his anxiety to secure so valuable an opinion. I only wonder what lucky star guided him to so excellent an adviser."

Mr. Sheldon looked from Dr. Jedd to Valentine Hawkehurst as he said this. The physician's face told him no more than he might have learnt

from a blank sheet of paper. Valentine's face was dark and gloomy; but that gloomy darkness might mean no more than natural grief.

"I will take you to my stepdaughter's room at once," he said to the physician.

"I think it will be better for me to see the young lady alone," the Doctor answered coolly; "that is to say, in the presence of her nurse only."

"As you please," Mr. Sheldon replied.

He went back to his study. Georgy was sitting there, whimpering in a feeble way at intervals; and near her sat Diana, silent and gloomy. A settled gloom, as of the grave itself, brooded over the house. Mr. Sheldon flung himself into a chair with an impatient gesture. He had sneered at the inconvenience involved in uncarpeted floors, but he was beginning to feel the aggravation of that inconvenience. These two women in his study were insupportable to him. It seemed as if there was no room in the house in which he could be alone: and just now he had bitter need of solitary meditation.

"Let them arrange the dining-room somehow, carpet or no carpet," he said to his wife. "We must have some room to dine in; and I can't have you here, Georgy; I have letters to write."

Mrs. Sheldon and Diana were not slow to take the hint.

"I'm sure I don't want to be here, or anywhere," exclaimed Georgy in piteous accents; "I feel so miserable about Charlotte, that if I could lie down and die, it would be a comfort to me. And it really seems a mockery having dinner at such a time. It's just as it was during poor Tom's illness: there were fowls and all sorts of things cooked, and no one ever ate them."

"For God's sake, go away!" cried Mr. Sheldon passionately; "your perpetual clack is torture to me."

Georgy hurried from the room, followed closely by Diana.

"Did you ever see anyone more anxious?" Mrs. Sheldon asked, with something like pride.

"I would rather see Mr. Sheldon less anxious," Diana answered gravely.

CHAPTER II.

DR. JEDD'S OPINION.

Alone, Philip Sheldon breathed more freely. He paced the room, waiting for the appearance of the Doctor; and with almost every turn he looked at the clock upon the chimney-piece.

How intolerable seemed the slow progress of the moments! How long that man Jedd was staying in the sick-room! And yet, not long: it was he, Philip Sheldon, who was losing count of time. Where was Valentine? He opened the door of the room, and looked out. Yes, there was a figure on the stairs. The lover was waiting the physician's verdict.

A door on the landing above opened, and the step of the Doctor sounded on the upper flight. Mr. Sheldon waited for Dr. Jedd's appearance.

"I shall be glad to hear your opinion," he said quietly; and the Doctor followed him into the study. Valentine followed the Doctor, to Mr. Sheldon's evident surprise.

"Mr. Hawkehurst is very anxious to hear what I have to say," said Dr. Jedd; "and I really see no objection to his hearing it."

"If you have no objection, I can have none," Mr. Sheldon answered. "I must confess, your course of proceeding appears to me altogether exceptional, and—"

"Yes, Mr. Sheldon; but then, you see, the case is altogether an exceptional case," said the physician gravely.

"You think so?"

"Decidedly. The young lady is in extreme danger. Yes, Mr. Sheldon, in extreme danger. The mistake involved in her removal to-day is a mistake which I cannot denounce too strongly. If you had wanted to kill your stepdaughter, you could scarcely have pursued a more likely course for the attainment of your object. No doubt you were actuated by the most amiable motives.

I can only regret that you should have acted without competent advice."

"I believed myself to be acting for the best," replied Philip Sheldon in a strange mechanical way.

He was trying to estimate the true meaning of the Doctor's address. Was he merely expressing anger against an error of ignorance or stupidity; or was there a more fatal significance in his words?

"You overwhelm me," the stockbroker said presently; "you positively overwhelm me, by your view of my daughter's condition. Dr. Doddleson apprehended no danger. He saw our dear girl on Sunday morning—yesterday morning," added Mr. Sheldon, wonder-stricken to find that the interval was so brief between the time in which he had walked with Valentine and Dr. Doddleson in the garden at Harold's-hill, and the present moment. To Valentine it seemed still more wonderful. What a bridgeless gulf between yesterday morning and to-night! All his knowledge of this man Sheldon, all the horror in-

volved in Tom Halliday's death, had come upon him in that brief span.

"I should like to see Dr. Doddleson's prescriptions," said Dr. Jedd with grave politeness.

Mr. Sheldon produced them from his pocket-book with an unshaken hand. No change of countenance, no tremulous hand, no broken voice, betrayed his apprehension. The one distinguishing mark of his manner was an absent, half-mechanical tone, as of a man whose mind is employed otherwise than in the conversation of the moment. Prompt at calculation always, he was at this crisis engaged in a kind of mental arithmetic. "The chances of defeat, so much; the chances of detection, ——?"

A rapid survey of his position told him what those chances were. Detection by Dr. Jedd? Yes. *That* had come to him already, perhaps. But would any actual harm to him come of such detection?

He calculated the chances for and against this—and the result was in his favour. That Dr. Jedd should form certain opinions of Miss

Halliday's case was one thing; that he should give public utterance to those opinions was another thing.

"What can his opinion matter to me?" Mr. Sheldon asked himself; "opinion cannot touch me in a case where there is no such thing as certainty. He has seen the dilatation of the pupil—even that old fool Doddleson saw it—and has taken fright. But no jury in England would hang a man on such evidence as that; or if a jury could be found to put the rope round a man's neck, the British public and the British press would be pretty sure to get the rope taken off again."

"Chloric æther, spirits of ammonia—hum, ha, hum—yes," muttered Dr. Jedd, looking at one prescription. "Quinine, yes; aqua pura," he murmured, looking at another.

He threw them aside with a half-contemptuous gesture; and then took up a pen and began to write.

"My mode of treatment will be quite different from that adopted by Dr. Doddleson," he

said; "but I apprehend no difficulty in bringing that gentleman round to my view of the case when we meet."

As he wrote his prescription, Philip Sheldon rose and looked over his shoulder.

The form of the prescription told him that Dr. Jedd knew—all! He had suspected this from the first; and the confirmation of this suspicion did not shake him. He grew firmer, indeed; for now he knew on what ground he was standing, and what forces were arrayed against him.

"I really do not understand the basis of your treatment," he said, still looking over the physician's shoulder.

Dr. Jedd turned his chair with a sudden movement and faced him.

"Am I talking to Mr. Sheldon the stock-broker, or Mr. Sheldon the surgeon-dentist?" he asked.

This was a blow. This allusion to the past was a sharper stroke than any that Philip Sheldon had before received. He looked at Valen-

tine; from Valentine to the physician. What did it mean, this mention of the past? That blabbing fool George had talked to his friend of the days in Fitzgeorge-street, no doubt; and Valentine had blabbed Mr. Sheldon's antecedents to the physician.

Was this what it all meant? Or did it mean more than this? Whatever it might mean, he faced the hidden danger; and met the uncertainties of his position as calmly as he met its certainties.

"I have no desire to interfere with your treatment," he said very quietly; "but I have some knowledge of the Pharmacopœia, and I confess myself quite at a loss to understand your prescription."

"Dr. Doddleson will understand it when he has heard my opinion. There is no time to be lost.—Mr. Hawkehurst, will you take this to the chemist, and wait for the medicine? Miss Halliday cannot take it too soon. I shall be here to-morrow at nine o'clock.—If you wish me to see Dr. Doddleson, Mr. Sheldon, you will per-

haps arrange an appointment with him for that hour."

"It is rather an early hour."

"No hour is too early in a case attended with so much danger. Perhaps it would be as well for me to call on Dr. Doddleson as I drive home. I shall make a point of seeing Miss Halliday twice a day. I find your housekeeper a very sensible person. She will remain in close attendance upon the sick-room; and I must beg that there is no quackery—no home-made remedies. I have given your housekeeper all directions as to treatment and diet, and she has my orders to allow no one but herself in the invalid's room. There is a marked tendency to delirium, and quiet is indispensable."

"I have said as much myself," answered Mr. Sheldon.

"Mr. Hawkehurst will undertake to see to the making-up of my prescriptions," continued Dr. Jedd as he drew on his gloves. "He is very anxious about the young lady, and it will afford him some relief of mind to be employed in her

service. No, thanks," he said, putting aside Mr. Sheldon's hand as that gentleman offered him his fee. "I have already received my honorarium from Mr. Hawkehurst."

There was no more to be said. The physician wished the two men good-evening, and returned to his carriage to be driven home to dinner by way of Plantagenet-square, where he saw Dr. Doddleson, and appointed to meet him next day, much to the delight of that individual, who was proud to be engaged in a case with the great Jedd.

Valentine left the house on the heels of the Doctor. He came back in about twenty minutes with the medicine. He did not go to the principal gate, but to a little side-gate, near the offices of the Gothic Villa—a gate to which butchers and bakers came with their wares in the morning.

"I want to see Miss Paget," he said to the maid who answered his summons; "and I want to see her without disturbing Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon. Do you know where to find her?"

"Yes, sir; she's in her own room. I took her a cup of tea there ten minutes ago. She's got a headache with fretting about our poor young lady, and she won't go down to dinner with master and missus."

"Will you ask her to step out here and speak to me for a few minutes?"

"Won't you come indoors and see her, sir?"

"No; I'd rather see her in the garden."

It was still daylight here, but it was growing shadowy among the avenues in Kensington Gardens. The gate near which Valentine waited was not to be seen from the windows of dining or drawing-room.

The housemaid ran off to summon Miss Paget; and in less than five minutes Diana appeared, dressed in her hat and garden-jacket.

"Will you come out into the road with me, dear?" asked Valentine. "I have something serious to say to you."

"And I am so anxious to hear what the doctor has said," answered Diana, as she took Valentine's arm.

The road before the Lawn was very quiet at this hour of the evening, and here they were safely beyond Mr. Sheldon's ken.

"Tell me the doctor's opinion, Valentine," Diana said eagerly. "Does he think the case very serious?"

"He does. It is more serious than you or I could have imagined, if Providence had not helped me to discover the truth."

"What do you mean, Valentine?"

He gave her in brief the story of his day's work. She listened to him breathlessly, but uttered no exclamation until his story was finished.

"It is most horrible," she said at last; "but I believe it is most true. There has been so much in that man's conduct that has mystified me; and *this* explains all. But what earthly motive can have prompted this hideous crime?"

"He believes that he has a beneficial interest in her death. I cannot fully understand his motive; but, rely upon it, there is a motive, and a sufficient one. And I have let that man delude me into belief in his honesty, after I had been

warned against him! But there is no time for regrets. Diana, I look to you to help me in saving my dear love."

"It is not too late to save her?"

"Dr. Jedd will commit himself to no positive statement. He tells me she is in danger; but he does not refuse all hope. Now listen, my dear. In that house I have only two people to help me —Ann Woolper and yourself. Ann Woolper I hold only by a feeble bond. I think she will be true to us; but I am not sure of her. Sheldon's influence over her is a powerful one; and God knows what concession he might extort from her. She is the ostensible guardian of Charlotte's room; you must contrive to be the real guardian. You must keep custody over the custodian. How is your room situated in relation to Charlotte's room?"

"The doors of the two rooms are exactly opposite."

"Providence favours us there. Can you keep watch over Charlotte's door from your room without making your guardianship too apparent?"

"I can."

"Day and night?"

"Day and night."

"God bless you, dear! Her life may be saved by your fidelity."

"I would do as much to render her a smaller service."

"My dear girl! And now go back to the house. Here is the medicine. You will give that into Mrs. Woolper's hands; she has received her instructions from Dr. Jedd, and those instructions leave no room for doubt. If she permits Sheldon to tamper with the medicine or the food of her patient, she will be the wilful accomplice of a murderer. I think she may be trusted."

"I will watch her."

"The charge of procuring the medicine is mine. I shall come to this house many times in the course of every day; but I am bound to prepare myself for the hour in which Mr. Sheldon may forbid me his house. In that event I shall come to this gate. I suppose the servants would stand by me if you pleaded for me?"

"I am sure they would."

"And now, dear, go; the medicine is wanted. I shall come back in a few hours to inquire if there is any change for the better. Go."

They had returned to the gate ere this. He grasped the hand which she held out to him, and stood by the little gate watching her till she disappeared through the door of the servants' quarters. When the door closed, he walked slowly away. He had done all that it was possible for him to do, and now came his worst misery. There was nothing left for him but to wait the issue of events.

What was he to do? Go home to his lodgings—eat, drink, sleep? Was it possible for him to eat or to sleep while that precious life trembled in the balance? He walked slowly along the endless roads and terraces in a purposeless way. Careless people pushed against him, or he pushed against them; children brushed past him as they ran. What a noisy, busy, clattering world it seemed! And she lay dying! O, the droning, dreary organs, and the hackneyed, common tunes, how excruciating they were to him to-night!

He emerged into the high-road by and by, in all the bustle and riot of Notting-hill. The crowded shops, the clamorous people, seemed strange to him. It was like the clamour of a foreign city. He walked on past the bustle and riot, by the quieter terraces near Holland-park, and still held on to Shepherd's-bush, where he went into a little public-house and called for some brandy.

There was a bench on one side of the space in front of the bar, and towards this he pushed his way.

"Where are you shoving to, my young swell?" growled a sturdy cabman, indignant at the outrage inflicted by Valentine's elbows; but in the next moment the sturdy cabman dashed suddenly forward and caught the young swell in his strong arms.

"My eye, young un!" he cried; "where do you want to go to?—Here, someone bring a mug of cold water; I'm blest if he ain't in a fit!"

Happily it was no fit, only a dead faint into which Mr. Hawkehurst had fallen. He came

back to consciousness presently, after a few spoonfuls of brandy had been forced into his mouth, and looked about him with a helpless stare.

"I'm jiggered if I don't believe he's fainted for want of wittles!" cried the cabman. "They keeps up till they drop, sometimes, these seedy swells—walks about lookin' like so many Dossays, on a hempty stomach. Here, someone bring a plate o' cold meat, and look sharp about it. I'll stand sam."

Valentine looked up with a faint smile.

"And I'll stand sam for anything you like to order, my friend," he said, holding out his hand to the good-natured cabman. "I've eaten nothing since last night; but I haven't fasted for want of money. There are worse troubles than an empty pocket, and I'm not unacquainted with *that*."

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir," said the man sheepishly, very much ashamed of his benevolence; "but, you see, it ain't the fust time I've seen a swell come to the pavement with a cropper, in consequence of having gone it too fast, and cleaned hisself out, in a manner of speaking."

CHAPTER III.

NON DORMIT JUDAS.

THE summer darkness closed round the Bayswater Villa, but of sleep there was little for anyone in that household during this sad night. Is there not, in almost every household, a memory of such days and nights—dread intervals in which the common course of life and time seems to be suspended, and all the interests of the universe hang upon the fitful breath of one dear sufferer?

Lonely were the watchers in Mr. Sheldon's house. Georgy was in her own room, forbidden to disturb the invalid by her restless presence—now lying down, now pacing to and fro, now praying a little, now crying a little—the very ideal of helpless misery.

In the sick-room there was no one but the invalid and Ann Woolper. In the room oppo-

site watched Diana Paget, her door ajar, her senses sharpened by anxiety, quick to hear the faintest sound of footfall on the stairs, or to feel the slightest vibration from stealthily-opened door on the story below.

Alone in the study sat Philip Sheldon, at the table where he was accustomed to write—a blank sheet of paper before him, a pen held loosely in his outstretched hand, and his eyes fixed in an unseeing gaze upon the bookcase opposite—the living image of care. Now that the turmoil of the day was done, and there was silence in the house, he had set himself to face his position. It was no trifling task which he had to perform. Not one difficulty, or one set of difficulties, had he to meet and master. The armed enemies upspringing from the dragon's-teeth which he had sown were not to be set fighting amongst themselves, nor were they to be smashed by any rocks that he could hurl amongst them. They stood around him in an awful circle, and turn which way he would, he saw the same appalling figure, armed to the teeth, and invincible as death.

What had he to fear?

Detection of a past crime? No, that was a fool's terror which shook him at the sound of Tom Halliday's name—a child's fear of the nursery bogie. Detection in the present was more to be dreaded. The work that he had done was, according to his belief, work that could not be proved against him. But there are crimes of which to be accused is to be condemned. Lawyers may plead, and juries may acquit; but the fiat of public opinion goes forth against the suspected wretch, and on *his* forehead for ever shows the dark brand of Cain.

For the criminal of almost every shade of colour, save this one dread hue, society has a sanctuary and earth a refuge. The forger may find a circle in which the signing of another man's name, under the pressure of circumstances, is held to be a misfortune rather than an offence. The swindler has the gentlemanly brotherhood and sisterhood of Macaire for his family, and need never be lonely. The thief may dance away his jovial nights among kindred spirits, and be

carried to his grave by sorrowing fellow-artists. The coiner may be jolly in his hiding-place among his chosen band of brother coiners. But for the murderer there is no such thing as human sympathy; and, when the blood of Nancy dyes his cruel hand, Bill Sykes may thank God if he has a dog that will follow him to his wretched end, for from mankind he can hope nothing.

Mr. Sheldon did not contemplate his position from any sentimental point of view; but he told himself that to be suspected of having poisoned his friend, and to be accused of poisoning, or attempting to poison, his daughter, would be ruin—ruin social and commercial, ruin complete and irretrievable.

And having faced one of these dread armed antagonists, he passed on to another shadowy enemy.

What if Charlotte recovered, and he escaped the taint of uttered suspicion—for Dr. Jedd's private opinion he cared very little—what then?

Then the grim antagonist lifted his visor and showed him the countenance of Commercial Disgrace.

Unless within the next few weeks he could command from eight to ten thousand pounds, his disgrace as a member of the Stock Exchange was inevitable. Charlotte's death would give him the means of raising as much upon the policies of assurance obtained by her, and which, by the terms of her will, he would inherit. The life-insurance people might be somewhat slow to settle his claims; but he had all possible facilities for the raising of money upon any tangible security, and he could count upon immediate cash in the event of Charlotte's death.

But what if she should not die? What if this nameless languor, this mysterious atrophy, taken vigorously in hand by Dr. Jedd, should be vanquished, and the girl should live?

What indeed? A sharp spasm contracted the stockbroker's hard cold face as he pictured to himself the result of failure.

He saw the crowd of busy faces in the House, and heard the low hum of many voices, and the dull sound of the big half-glass doors swinging to and fro, and the constant tread of hurrying feet.

He heard the buzz of voices and the tramp of feet stop as suddenly as if that busy tide of human life had been arrested by an enchanter's wand. The enchanter is no other than the head-waiter of the Stock Exchange, who takes his position by a stand in the midst of that great meeting-place, and removes his hat.

After that sudden silence comes a faint sound of anxious whisperings; and then again a second silence, still more profound, prevails in that assembly. Three times, with wooden hammer sounding dull against the woodwork of his stand, the waiter raps his awful rap. To some it is the call of doom. The commercial Nemesis hides her awful countenance. Slow and solemn sound those three deliberate strokes of the wooden hammer. You can hear the stertorous breathing of an apoplectic stockbroker; the short panting respiration of some eager speculator—the rest is silence. And then the voice of the waiter—proxy for the commercial Nemesis—calmly enunciates the dread decree.

"Philip Sheldon begs to inform the members

of the House that he cannot comply with his bargains."

A sudden flutter of the leaves of many note-books follows that awful announcement. Voices rise loud in united utterance of surprise or indignation. The doors swing to and fro, as hurrying members dash in and out to scan the market and ascertain how far they may be affected by this unlooked-for failure.

This was the scene which the watcher pictured to himself; and for him Fate could wear no aspect more terrible. Respectability, solvency, success,—these were the idols to which he had given worship and tribute in all the days of his life. To propitiate these inexorable ones he had sacrificed all the dearest and best blessings which earth and heaven offer to mankind. Rest or happiness, as other men consider these blessings, he had never known; the sense of triumph in success of the present, the feverish expectation of success in the future—these had stood to him in the place of love and hope, pleasure and idlesse; all the joys and comforts of this lower world, and all the

holy dreams of purer pleasures in a world to come.

One vague, brief thought of all that he had sacrificed flashed across his brain; and swift upon its track followed the thought of what he stood to lose.

Something more than his position upon the Stock Exchange was at stake. He had done desperate things in the vain hope of sustaining that position against the destroying sweep of Fortune's turning tide. Bills were afloat which he must meet, or stand before the world a detected forger; bills drawn upon companies that were shadowy as the regions of their supposed operations. Bills amounting to five thousand pounds, drawn upon the Honduras Mahogany Company, Limited: other bills amounting to upwards of three thousand pounds against the Pennsylvanian Anthracite Coal Corporation, Limited. The sum he might raise on the policies of insurance would about cover these bills; and simultaneously with their withdrawal, fresh bills might be floated, and the horse-leech cry of the brokers for contango might be

satisfied until there came a reaction in the City, and the turning tide should float him into some harbour of safety. Beyond this harbour shone a splendid beacon, the dead girl's inheritance—his, to claim by right of the same will that would give him the sum insured upon her life.

Without this immediate ready-money there was no extrication from the hideous labyrinth. His position had been already too long sustained by bills of exchange. There were people in the City who wanted, in vulgar parlance, to see the colour of his money. He knew this—and knew how frail the tenure by which he held his position, and how dire the crash which would hurl him down to ruin.

After the proclamation of his inability to meet his differences—the Deluge: and looking gloomily athwart the flood and tempest, he saw neither ark nor Ararat.

Charlotte's death was the one chance of redemption; and to that event he looked as to a figure in a mathematical proposition. Of this girl herself, with all her wealth of beauty and goodness, of hope and love, he had scarcely any

definite idea. She had so long been no more to him than an important figure in the mathematics of his life, that he had lost the power to behold her in any other light.

The hardness of his nature was something lower than absolute cruelty of heart. It was less human than the half-insane ferocity of a Nero. It was a calm indifference to the waste of human life, which, displayed upon a larger field of operation, would have made a monster cold and passionless as Sphinx or Chimæra.

"I must see Ann Woolper," he said to himself presently; "she will not dare to exclude me from that room."

He listened to the striking of the Bayswater clocks. Two o'clock. Within and without the house reigned a profound silence. The room immediately over Mr. Sheldon's study was Charlotte's room, and here there had been for a long time no sound of life or movement.

"Asleep, I daresay," muttered Mr. Sheldon, "invalid and nurse both."

He exchanged his boots for slippers, which he

kept in a little cupboard below the bookshelves among old newspapers, and went softly from the room. The gas was burning dimly on the stairs and on the landing above. He opened the door of the invalid's room softly, and went in.

Mrs. Woolper was seated beside the bed. She looked up at him with unwinking eyes.

"I thought you was a-bed, sir," she said.

"No; I am too anxious to sleep."

"I think everyone is anxious, sir," Mrs. Woolper answered gravely.

"How is your patient?"

The pretty white curtains of the little brass Arabian bedstead were drawn.

"She is asleep, sir. She sleeps a great deal. The doctor said that was only natural."

"She has taken her medicine, I suppose?" said Mr. Sheldon.

He glanced round the room as he asked this question, but could see no trace of medicine-bottle or glass.

"Yes, sir; she has taken it twice, the poor dear."

"Let me look at the medicine."

"The strange doctor said as I was to let no one touch it, sir."

"Very likely. But that direction doesn't apply to me."

"He said no one, sir."

"You are an old fool!" muttered Mr. Sheldon savagely.

"Ah no, sir," the housekeeper answered, with a profound sigh; "I am wiser than I was when poor Mr. Halliday died."

This answer, and the sigh, and the look of solemn sadness which accompanied it, told him that this woman knew all. She had suspected him long ago; but against her unsupported suspicion the mere force of his character had prevailed. She was wiser now; for on this occasion suspicion was confirmed by the voice of science.

He stood for some minutes looking at his old nurse, with a dark moody face. What could he feel except supreme indignation against this woman, who dared to oppose him, when he had the best right to rely on her faithful service? She

had promised him her fidelity, and at the first hint from a stranger she coolly deserted him and went over to the enemy.

"Do you mean to say that you refuse to let me look at the medicine which you have been giving to my stepdaughter?" he asked.

"I mean to say that I will obey the orders given me by the strange doctor," the old woman answered with a calm sadness of tone, "even if it turns you against me; you that have given me a comfortable home when there was nothing before me but the workhouse; you that I carried in my arms forty years ago. If it was anything less than her dear life that was in danger, sir, and if I hadn't stood by her father's death-bed, I couldn't stand against you like this. But knowing what I do, I will stand firm as a rock between you and her; and think myself all the more truly your faithful servant because I do not fear to offend you."

"That's so much arrant humbug, Mrs. Woolper. I suppose you've made your book with Miss Halliday and Miss Halliday's lover, and think

you can serve your turn best by sticking to them and throwing me over the bridge. It's only the way of the world. You're genuine Yorkshire, and know how to pack your cards for winning the trick. But suppose I were to spoil your game by turning you out of doors neck and crop? What then?"

"I don't think you'll do that, sir."

"Why not, pray?"

"I don't think you dare do it, in the face of that strange doctor."

"You don't? And so Dr. Jedd is the master of this house, is he?"

"Yes, sir. Till that poor dear young lady is well again, if ever that day comes, I think Dr. Jedd will be the real master in this house."

"By —! Mrs. Woolper, you're a cool hand, I must say!"

He could say no more. Of passionate or declamatory language he had no command. The symbols of thought that obtained in his world were of a limited and primitive range.

"You're a cool hand," he repeated under his

breath. And then he turned and left the room, opening and closing the door less cautiously than on his entrance.

The door of the opposite room was opened softly as he came out into the corridor, and Diana Paget stood before him, dressed as she had been in the day.

"What!" he exclaimed impatiently, "are you up too?"

"Yes, Mr. Sheldon. I cannot sleep while Lotta is so ill."

"Humph! I suppose you mean to get yourself on the sick-list, and give us another invalid to nurse."

"I will not trouble you to nurse me if I should be ill."

"Ah!" growled the stockbroker, as he went to his own room, "you are a pack of silly women altogether; and your fine friend Hawkehurst is more womanish than the silliest of you. Good-night."

He went into his own room, where he found his wife still awake. Her weak lamentings and

bewailings were insupportable to him; and at three o'clock he went downstairs, put on his boots and a light overcoat, and went out into the dim regions of Bayswater, whence he saw the sun rise red above the eastern roofs and chimneys, and where he walked until the first clatter of hoofs and roll of wheels began to echo through the empty streets, and, with faint distant cries of sweeps and milkwomen, life's chorus recommenced.

It was seven o'clock when he went back to his house, and let himself in softly with his latch-key. He knew that he had been walking a long time, and that he had seen the sun rise; but what streets or squares he had been walking he did not know. He crept upstairs to his dressing-room with stealthy footsteps, and made an elaborate toilet. At eight o'clock he was seated at break-fast in the hastily-arranged dining-room, with the newspapers by the side of his cup and saucer. At nine he went into the hall to receive Dr. Jedd and Dr. Doddleson, who arrived almost simultaneously. His carefully-arranged hair and

whiskers, his well-made unpretentious clothes, his spotless linen, would have done credit to an archbishop. Of all the cares and calculations of his long dreary night there was no trace, except a certain dulness in his eyes, and the dark half-circles below them.

CHAPTER IV.

COUNTING THE COST.

For four days and four nights there was fear and watching in Mr. Sheldon's house; and in all that time the master never quitted it, except stealthily, in the dead of the night, or at early daybreak, to roam in a purposeless manner he knew not where. The doctors came and went,—Dr. Doddleson once a day, Dr. Jedd two or three times a day,—and everyone in villas adjoining and villas opposite, and even in villas round the corner, knew that the stockbroker's stepdaughter lay sick unto death; for the white horses of Dr. Jedd's landau were as the pale horse of the Pale Rider himself, and where they came was danger or death. Ah, thank God! to some they have brought hope and blessing; not always the dread answer, "You have called me in vain!"

Valentine Hawkehurst came many times in the day; but between him and Mr. Sheldon there could be no safe meeting; and the lover came quietly to the little gate, where a kindly housemaid gave him a little note from Diana Paget. Miss Paget wrote half-a-dozen little notes of this kind in the course of every day, but she never left her post in the room opposite the sick-chamber. She complained of headache, or of some vague illness which prevented her taking her meals in the dining-room, and Mr. Sheldon was fain to be satisfied with this explanation of her conduct.

She was on guard; and the wretched master of the house knew that she was on guard, and that if Ann Woolper could be bought over or frightened into compliance with his wishes, this girl would still remain, faithful as watchdog, by the door of her friend and companion. He asked himself whether, by violent or diplomatic process, he could rid himself of this second watcher; and the answer was in the negative. The circle around him was a circle not to be broken.

His wife, as yet, had been told nothing of the

suspicions that reigned in the breasts of other people. He knew this; for in his wife's face there was no token of that dark knowledge, and she, of all people, would be least skilled to deceive his scrutinising eyes. Nor had the younger servants of his household any share in the hideous suspicion. He had watched the countenance of the maid who waited on him, and had convinced himself of this.

It was something to know that even these were not yet leagued against him; but he could not tell at what moment they too might be sworn into that secret society which was growing up against him in his own house. Power to carry out his own schemes in the face of these people he felt that he had none. Upon the dark road which he had travelled until of late without let or hindrance, there had arisen, all at once, an insurmountable barrier, with the fatal inscription, Here there is no Thoroughfare.

Beyond this barrier he could not pass. Sudden as the dread arrest of Lot's wife was the mandate which had checked his progress. He

was brought to a dead stop; and there was nothing for him to do but to wait the issue of Fate. He stood, defiant, unabashed, face to face with the figure of Nemesis, and calmly awaited the lifting of the veil.

He hoped that Charlotte Halliday would die. If by her death he could tide-over his difficulties and drift into smooth water, it would be but a very small thing to him that Dr. Jedd, and Dr. Doddleson enlightened by his colleague, and Valentine Hawkehurst, and Diana Paget, and a stupid pig-headed old Yorkshirewoman, should carry in their minds for the remainder of their lives the suspicion that by his means that fair young life had been brought to its early close.

What would it amount to, in the future of his own existence? Prudential considerations would induce these people to lock the secret of this suspicion in their own breasts. Dr. Jedd would bow to him somewhat coldly perhaps, if they met in the streets of London, or possibly might refuse to make any return to his passing salutation; but the cut direct from Dr. Jedd

would not cast a shadow over his commercial career, or even weaken his social position. If, by the loud folly of Hawkehurst, some evil rumour about him should float as far eastward as the Stock Exchange, who would be found to give credence to the dark report? Men would shrug their shoulders and shake their heads incredulously; and one of these wise men of the east would remark that "A fellow in Sheldon's position doesn't do that kind of thing, you know;" while another would say, "I dined with him at Greenwich last summer, and a remarkably good dinner he gave us. Dawkins, the great shipbuilder, and M'Pherson, of M'Pherson and Flinders, the Glasgow merchants, were there. Very jolly affair, I assure you. Deuced gentlemanly fellow, Phil Sheldon." And so the matter would end.

Would there be an inquest in the event of his stepdaughter's death? Well, no. Jedd knew that in such a case all *post-mortem* inquiry must end in confusion and perplexity, statement and counter-statement from medical witnesses, who

would contradict one another persistently in the support of their pet theories, and who would regard the investigation as a very convenient opportunity for ventilating their own opinions and airing their own importance. A considerable number of the canine race would be slaughtered, perhaps, in the process of dilettante experiments; the broad principles of chemical science would be discussed from every point of view, in innumerable letters published in the *Zeus* and the *Diurnal Hermes;* and the fact that an amiable and innocent young woman had been foully murdered would be swept out of the minds of mankind before a whirlwind of technical debate. Jedd was the last man to stake his reputation upon such a hazard. No; Mr. Sheldon knew that he had played a cautious game; and if he should ultimately lose the stake for which he had ventured, it would be because he had been just a little too cautious.

"These things are generally done too quickly," he said to himself. "My mistake has been to make matters too slow."

Come what might, of after-consequences to himself from Charlotte Halliday's illness or death he had no apprehension.

Thus it was that he met Dr. Jedd day after day with a face as calm as the stony countenance of that distinguished physician himself. Such anxiety as an affectionate stepfather should feel during the peril of his stepdaughter, Mr. Sheldon took care to express. Greater anxiety than this by no look or gesture did he betray. He knew that he was watched; and that the people about him were inimical to himself and to his interests; and he was never off his guard.

It had been necessary for him to come to London in order to be within easy reach of that troubled sea, the money-market. But perilous though the voyage of his bark across that tempestuous ocean was, he could not guide the helm in person. He was obliged to confide matters to the care of Mr. Frederick Orcott, whom he harassed with telegraphic despatches at all hours of the day, and who at this period seemed to spend his life between the stockbroker's office and Bayswater.

It seemed as if Mr. Sheldon meant to hold his ground in that house until the issue of events was determined. Valentine Hawkehurst and George Sheldon met at the solicitor's offices, and there was a long and serious consultation between them.

"One thing seems pretty clear," said George conclusively, "and that is that my brother Phil isn't to be got off the premises except by some very deep move. The question is, what move can be deep enough to trap such a man as he. He's a man who knows the inside of your mind better than you do yourself; and can reckon you up as easily as the simplest sum in arithmetic."

The two men talked together very seriously for some time after this, and on the same day Valentine lay in wait for Dr. Jedd as he left Philip Sheldon's house, and was driven back to town in that gentleman's carriage. On the road there was much serious talk between Miss Halliday's physician and Miss Halliday's lover. Valentine was still very grave and very anxious when he took his leave of Dr. Jedd; but he

was more hopeful than he had been for the last few days.

On the same evening Gustave Lenoble received a brief epistle from his plighted wife.

"My dear Gustave,—I regret to find from your letter that the doctors consider my father weaker than when I was last at Knightsbridge: but, even knowing this, I cannot come to him just yet. The duty which detains me here is even more sacred than his claim upon my care. And I know your goodness to him, and feel that in you he has a better friend and comforter than I could be to him. I thank you, dear, for your kindness to this poor broken-down wanderer, even more than for your generous devotion to me. And now I am going to ask you a favour. It is, that you will afford Mr. Hawkehurst, the person who will give you this letter, the help of your friendship and counsel, in very difficult and critical circumstances, which he will explain to you. I have spoken to you of him very little, though his devotion to my dear

adopted sister, Charlotte Halliday, brings him very near to me. Her long, and of late dangerous illness has been a bitter time of trial to him, even more than to me, but the trial has proved him true as steel. I think your counsel may be of some service to him just now, and I am sure your friendship will help to support him in a period of acute anxiety.

"Do not ask to see me, dear Gustave. I *cannot* leave this house while Charlotte is in danger; but if it please God to remove that danger, I shall then be free to go where I please, and my future life shall be at your disposal. Do not think me cold or ungrateful; I am only faithful to the first friend I ever knew.

"Yours always, with all affection,

"DIANA PAGET."

CHAPTER V.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

THREE days elapsed after the delivery of this letter. Upwards of a week had gone by since the return of Mr. Sheldon and his family from Harold's-hill: and as yet Philip Sheldon knew not what the issue of events was to be. Very vague were the oracular sentences which his questioning extorted from Dr. Jebb, and he had tried in vain to obtain a *tête-à-tête* interview with Dr. Doddleson. The physician of Burlington-row took care that his feeble colleague should not fall alone and defenceless into the pathway of Philip Sheldon. Of Charlotte's actual condition her stepfather, therefore, knew very little. He was told that her state was attended by danger; and the solemn faces which greeted him on every side implied that the danger was extreme. From her room

he was in a manner excluded. If he went to her door to make some benevolent and paternal inquiry, he was met on the threshold by Ann Woolper, the sleepless and unresting. If he hinted a natural desire to see his invalid stepdaughter, he was told that she had that moment fallen asleep, or that she was too ill to see him. There was always some plausible reason why he should not be admitted to her room; and finding that this was so, he did not press the question.

He had taken Mrs. Woolper's measure, and had found that she was too strong for him; doubly strong since she was supported and sustained by that second sleepless watcher, Diana Paget, whom Mr. Sheldon had long ago pronounced to be a strong-minded and superior young person.

From his wife he could obtain no real information—nothing but weepings and lamentations; weak apprehensions of future woe, weaker retrospective reflections on the fatal illness and untimely end of her first husband. Georgy was admitted once or twice a day to the sick-room; but she emerged therefrom no wiser than she entered it. Sorrow

in the present, and the fear of greater sorrow to come, had utterly prostrated this poor weak soul. She believed what other people told her to believe; she hoped what they told her to hope. She was the very incarnation and express image of helpless misery.

So, in utter darkness of mind, Mr. Sheldon awaited his destiny. The day drew very near on which he must find certain sums of ready-money, or must accept the dreary alternative of ruin and disgrace. He had the policies of assurance in his cash-box, together with the will which made him Charlotte's sole legatee; he had fixed in his own mind upon the man to whom he could apply for an advance of four thousand pounds on one of the two policies, and he relied on getting his banker to lend him money on the security of the second. But for the one needful event he had yet to wait. That event was Charlotte Halliday's death.

Of his dreary wanderings in the early morning the household knew nothing. The time which he chose for these purposeless rambles was just

the time in which no one was astir. The watchers in the two rooms above heard neither his going out nor his coming in, so stealthy were his movements on every occasion. But without this intermission from the dreadful concentration of his life, without this amount of physical exercise and fresh air, Philip Sheldon could scarcely have lived through this period. The solitude of ship-wrecked mariner cast upon a desolate island could hardly be more lonely than this man's life had been since his return from Harold's-hill. From his study to the dining-room, and from the dining-room back to his study, was the only variety of his dreary days and nights. He had an iron bedstead put up in his study, and there he lay in the earlier hours of the night, taking such rest as he could from fitful dozing that was scarcely sleep, or from brief intervals of heavy slumber made horrible by torturing dreams.

In this room he could hear every sudden movement in the hall, every footstep on the stairs, every opening and shutting of the outer door. Here, too, he could keep his watch, holding himself

ready to counter the movements of his enemies, should any opportunity arise for action on his part, defensive or aggressive.

To this room he stealthily returned one brilliant summer morning as the clocks were striking six. He had been walking in the Bayswater-road, amidst all the pleasant stir and bustle of early morning. Wagons coming in from the country, milkwomen setting forth on their daily rounds, clamorous young rooks cawing among the topmost branches of the elms, song-birds chirruping and gurgling their glad morning hymn; and over all things the glory and the freshness of the summer sunshine.

But to Philip Sheldon it was as if these things were not. For the last twelve or fifteen years of his life he had taken no heed of the change of the seasons, except insomuch as the passage of time affected his bill-book, or the condition of that commercial world which was the beginning and end of his life. Now, less than ever, had he an ear for the carolling of birds, or an eye for the glory of summer sunlight, or the flickering

shadows of summer leaves faintly stirred by the soft summer wind.

He reëntered his house with a half-dazed sense of the stir and life that had been about him in the high-road. It was a relief to him to escape this life and brightness, and to take shelter in the gloom of his study, where the shutters were closed, and only a faint glimmer of day crept through a chink in the shrunken wood-work.

For the first time since the beginning of this dreary period of idleness and suspense he felt himself thoroughly beaten, and, instead of going up to his dressing-room for his careful morning toilet, as it was his habit to do at this hour, he flung himself, dressed as he was, upon the low iron bedstead, and fell into a heavy slumber.

Yes, there they were; the familiar tortures of his slumbers, the shadows of busy, eager faces; and upon all one universal expression of mingled anger and surprise. The sound of a wooden hammer striking three solemn strokes; the faint tones of Tom Halliday's voice, thanking him for his friendly care; the dying look in Tom Halli-

day's face, turned to him with such depth of trust and affection. And then, across the shadowy realm of dreams, there swept the slow, solemn progress of a funeral cortège,—plumed hearses, blacker than blackest night; innumerable horses, with funereal trappings and plumed headgear waving in an icy wind; long trains of shrouded figures stretching on into infinite space, in spectral procession that knew neither beginning nor end. And in all the solemn crowd passing perpetually with the same unceasing motion, there was no sound of human footfall, no tramp of horse's hoof, only that dismal waving of black plumage in an icy wind, and the deep boom of a bell tolling for the dead.

He awoke with a start, and exclaimed, "If this is what it is to sleep, I will never sleep again!"

In the next minute he recovered himself. He had been lying on his back. The endless pageant, the dreadful tolling of the funeral bell, meant no more than nightmare, the common torment of all humanity.

"What a fool I must be!" he muttered to himself, as he wiped his forehead, which had grown cold and damp in the agony of his dream.

He opened the shutters, and then looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. To his surprise, he found that he had been sleeping three hours. It was nine o'clock. He went upstairs to dress. There was an unusual stir in the corridor above. Ann Woolper was standing there, with her hand on the door of the sick-room, talking to Diana, who covered her face suddenly as he approached, and disappeared into her own room.

The beating of his heart quickened suddenly. Something had happened to disturb the common course of events. Something? What was likely to happen, except the one dread circumstance for which he hoped and waited with such horrible eagerness?

In Ann Woolper's solemn face he read an answer to his thought. For the first time he was well-nigh losing his self-possession. It was with an effort that he steadied himself sufficiently

to ask the usual conventional question in the usual conventional tone.

"Is she any better this morning, Ann?"

"Yes, sir, she is much better," the Yorkshirewoman answered solemnly. "She is where none can harm her now."

Yes: it was the usual periphrase of these vulgar people. He knew all their cant by heart.

"You mean to say—she—is dead?"

He no longer tried to conceal his agitation. It was a part of his duty to be agitated by the news of his stepdaughter's untimely death.

"O, sir, you may well be sorry," said the Yorkshirewoman, with deep feeling. "She was the sweetest, most forgiving creature that ever came into this world; and to the last no hard or cruel word ever passed her innocent lips. Yes, sir, she is gone; she is beyond the power of anyone to harm her."

"All that sort of stuff is so much hypocritical twaddle, Mrs. Woolper," muttered Mr. Sheldon impatiently; "and I recommend you to keep it for the chaplain of the workhouse in which you

are likely to end your days. At what time—did —did this—sad event—happen?"

"About an hour ago."

In the very hour when, in his hideous dream, he had beheld the solemn funeral train winding on for ever through the dim realms of sleep. Was there some meaning in such foolish shadows, after all?

"And why was I not sent for?"

"You were asleep, sir. I came downstairs myself, and looked into your room. You were fast asleep, and I wouldn't disturb you."

"That was very wrong; but it was of a piece with the rest of your conduct, which has been from first to last antagonistic to me. I suppose I can see my stepdaughter now," Mr. Sheldon added, with a grim smile. "There is no further excuse—about headache—or sleep."

"No, sir, you cannot see her yet. In an hour, if you wish to come into this room, you can come."

"You are extremely obliging. I begin to doubt whether I am really in my own house.

In an hour, then, I will come. Where is my wife?"

"In her own room, sir, lying down; asleep, I believe."

"I will not disturb her. How about the registration, by the bye? That must be seen to."

"Dr. Jedd has promised to attend to that, sir."

"Has Dr. Jedd been here?"

"He was here an hour ago."

"Very good. And he will see to that," muttered Mr. Sheldon thoughtfully.

The event for which he had been so long waiting seemed at the last a little sudden. It had shaken his nerves more than he had supposed it possible that they could be shaken.

He went to his dressing-room, and on this occasion made a very hasty toilet. The event had been tardy, and he had no time to lose in discounting it, now that it had come to pass. He went from his dressing-room back to his study, took the packet containing the policies of assurance and the will from his deed-box, and left the house.

CHAPTER VI.

CONFUSION WORSE CONFOUNDED.

A CAB conveyed Mr. Sheldon swiftly to a dingy street in the City,—a street which might have been called the pavement of wasted footsteps, so many an impecunious wretch tramped to and fro upon those dreary flags in vain.

The person whom Mr. Sheldon came to see was a distinguished bill-discounter, who had served him well in more than one crisis, and on whose service he fancied he could now rely.

Mr. Kaye, the bill-discounter, was delighted to see his worthy friend Mr. Sheldon. He had just come up from his family at Brighton, and had quite a little court awaiting him in an outer chamber, through which Mr. Sheldon had been ushered to the inner office.

"It's rather early for such a visitor as you," Mr. Kaye said after a few commonplaces. "I have not been in town half an hour."

"My business is too important for any consideration about hours," answered Mr. Sheldon, "or I should not be here at all. I have just come from the deathbed of my wife's daughter."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the bill-discounter, looking inexpressibly shocked. Until that moment he had lived in supreme ignorance of the fact that Mr. Sheldon had a stepdaughter; but his sorrow-stricken expression of countenance might have implied that he had known and esteemed the young lady.

"Yes, it's very sad," said Mr. Sheldon; "and something more than sad for me. The poor girl had great expectations, and would have come into a very fine fortune if she had lived a year or two longer

"Ha! dear me, how very unfortunate! Poor young lady!"

"Jedd, and Doddleson—you know them by repute, of course—have been attending her for

the last six weeks. There will be no end of expense for me; and it has been all of no use."

"Consumption, I suppose?"

"Well, no, not pulmonary disease. A kind of atrophy. I scarcely know what to call it. Now, look here, Kaye. This illness has thrown all my affairs into a muddle. Taken in conjunction with the depressed state of the money-market, it has been altogether an upset for me. I have been staying at home looking after this poor girl and my wife, who of course is dreadfully cut up, and that sort of thing, when I ought to have been in the City. Luckily for me, and for my wife, in whose interests I acted, I took the precaution to get her daughter's life insured eight or nine months ago; in point of fact, immediately after finding she was heir-at-law to a considerable fortune. The policy is for five thousand pounds. I want you to give me four thousand immediately upon the strength of the document and of my stepdaughter's will."

"Give you four thousand!" exclaimed Mr. Kaye with a little unctuous laugh. "Do you

suppose I keep such a balance as that at my banker's?"

"I suppose that you can give me the money if you like."

"I might be able to get it for you."

"Yes, that's a kind of humbug a hundred years old. We've heard all about little Premium and his friend in the City, and so on, from that man who wrote plays and cut a figure in Parliament. You can give me the money on the spot if you like, Kaye; and if I didn't want ready-money very badly, I shouldn't come to you. The insurance company will give me five thousand in a month or two. I can give you my bill at two months' date, and deposit the policy in your hands as collateral security. I might get this money from other quarters,—from my banker's, for instance,—but I don't want to let them know too much."

Mr. Kaye deliberated. He had assisted Mr. Sheldon's financial operations, and had profited thereby. Money advanced upon such a security must be as safe as money invested in consols, un-

less there were anything doubtful in the circumstances of the policy; and that, with a man of Mr. Sheldon's respectability, was to the last degree unlikely.

"When do you want this money?" he asked at last.

"At the beginning of next week. On the twenty-fifth at latest."

"And this is the twentieth. Sharp work."

"Not at all. You could give me the money this afternoon, if you pleased."

"Well, I'll think it over. It's a matter in which I feel myself bound to take my solicitor's opinion. Suppose you meet him here to-morrow at twelve o'clock. You can bring the necessary evidence to support the claim—the doctor's and registrar's certificate, and so on?"

"Yes," Mr. Sheldon answered thoughtfully; "I will bring the documentary evidence. To-morrow at twelve, then."

Very little more was said. Mr. Sheldon left the will and the policy in the bill-discounter's possession, and departed. Things had gone as

smoothly as he could fairly expect them to go. From Mr. Kaye's office he went to the Unitas Bank, where he had a very friendly, but not altogether satisfactory, interview with the secretary. He wanted the Unitas people to advance him money on the strength of the second policy of assurance; but his balance had been very low of late, and the secretary could not promise compliance with his desires. Those Unitas shares, valued at five thousand pounds, which he had transferred to his beloved stepdaughter, had been retransferred by the young lady some months before, with a view to the more profitable investment of the money.

This money, as well as all else that Philip Sheldon could command, had gone to the same bottomless pit of unlucky speculation. From the bank the stockbroker went to his office, where he saw Frederick Orcott, to whom he announced his stepdaughter's death with all due appearance of sorrow. He sat for an hour in his office, arranging his affairs for the following day, then sent for another cab, and drove back to Bays-

water. The noonday press and noise of the City seemed strange to him, almost as they might have seemed to a man newly returned from lonely wanderings in distant wildernesses.

The blinds were down at the Lawn. His own handsome bed-chamber and adjoining dressing-room faced the road, and it was at the windows of these two rooms he looked. He fancied his weak foolish wife wailing and lamenting behind those lowered blinds.

"And I shall have to endure her lamentations," he thought with a shudder. "I shall have no further excuse for avoiding her. But, on the other hand, I shall have the pleasure of giving Mrs. Woolper and Miss Paget notice to quit."

He derived a grim satisfaction from this thought. Yes; insolence from those two women he would endure no longer. The time had come in which he would assert his right to be master in his own house. The game had been played against him boldly by Jedd and these people, and had been lost by them. He was the winner. He could now dismiss doctors, nurse, friend, lover.

Charlotte Halliday's death made him master of the situation.

He went into his house with the determination to assert his authority at once. Within, all was very quiet. He looked into the dining-room—it was quite empty. Into the study—also empty. He went slowly upstairs, composing his face into the appropriate expression. At the door of that chamber which to him should have seemed of all earthly chambers the most awful, he knocked softly.

There was no answer.

He knocked a little louder; but there was still no answer. A little louder again, and with the same result.

"Is there no one there?" he asked himself. "No one, except—?"

He opened the door, and went in, with unshaken nerves, to look upon that one quiet sleeper whom his summons could not awaken, whom his presence could not disturb.

There was no nurse or watcher by the bed. Everything was arranged with extreme neatness

and precision; but it seemed to him that there were objects missing in the room, objects that had been familiar to him during the dead girl's illness, and which were associated with her presence. The clock that had stood on the table by her bed, a stand of books, a low easy-chair, with embroidered cover worked by her mother and Diana Paget. The room looked blank and empty without these things, and Mr. Sheldon wondered what officious hand had removed them.

Yonder stood the pretty little bedstead, shrouded by closely-drawn white curtains. Philip Sheldon walked slowly across the room and drew aside one of the curtains. He had looked upon the death-sleep of Charlotte Halliday's father, why not upon hers?

She was not there. Those closely-drawn curtains shrouded only the bed on which she had slept in the tranquil slumbers of her careless girlhood. That cold lifeless form, whose rigid outline Philip Sheldon had steeled himself to see, had no place here.

He put his hand to his head, bewildered.

"What does it mean?" he asked himself; "surely she died in this room!"

He went hurriedly to his wife's room. They had taken Charlotte there, perhaps, shortly before her death. Some feverish fancy might have possessed her with the desire to be taken thither.

He opened the door and went in; but here again all was blank and empty. The room was arranged after its usual fashion; but of his wife's presence there was no token. His sense of mystification and bewilderment grew suddenly into a sense of fear. What did it mean? What hellish fooling had he been the dupe of?

He went to Diana's room. That, too, was empty. A trunk and a portmanteau, covered and strapped as if for removal, occupied the centre of the room.

There was no other room upon this floor. Above this floor there were only the rooms of the servants.

He went downstairs to the dining-room and rang the bell. The parlour-maid came in answer to his summons.

"Where is your mistress?" he asked.

"Gone out, sir; she went at eight o'clock this morning. And O, if you please, sir, Dr. Jedd called, and said I was to give you this—with the certificate."

The certificate! Yes, the certificate of Charlotte Halliday's death. The certificate which he must produce to-morrow, with other evidence, for the satisfaction of the bill-discounter and his legal adviser. He stared at the girl; still possessed by the sense of bewilderment which had come upon him on seeing those empty rooms upstairs. He took the letter from her almost mechanically, and tore it open without looking at the address. The certificate dropped to the ground. He picked it up with a tremulous hand, and for some moments stood staring at it with dazzled, unseeing eyes. He could see that it was a document with dates and names written in a clerkly hand. For some moments he could see no more. And then words and names shone out of the confusion of letters that spun and whirled, like motes in the sunshine, before his dazzled eyes.

"Valentine Hawkehurst, bachelor, author, Carlyle-terrace, Edgware-road, son of Arthur Hawkehurst, journalist; Charlotte Halliday, spinster, of The Lawn, Bayswater, daughter of Thomas Halliday, farmer."

He read no more.

It was the copy of a certificate of marriage—not a certificate of death—that had been brought to him.

"You can go," he said to the servant hoarsely.

He had a vague consciousness that she was staring at him with curious looks, and that it was not good for him to be watched by anyone just now.

"About dinner, sir, if you please?" the young woman began timidly.

"What do I know about dinner?"

"You will dine at home, sir?"

"Dine at home? Yes; Mrs. Woolper can give you your orders."

"Mrs. Woolper has gone out, sir. She has gone for good, I believe, sir; she took her boxes. And Miss Paget's luggage will be sent for, if you

please, sir. There's a letter, sir, that Mrs. Woolper left for you on the mantelpiece."

"She was very good. That will do; you can go."

The girl departed, bewildered like her fellow-servants by the strangeness of the day's proceedings, still more bewildered by the strangeness of her master's manner.

CHAPTER VII.

"THERE IS A WORD WILL PRIAM TURN TO STONE."

WHEN the servant was gone, Mr. Sheldon sat down and examined the document she had given him.

Yes, it was in due form. A certified copy of the certificate of a marriage performed that morning at the church of St. Mathias-in-the-Fields, Paddington, and duly witnessed by the registrar of that parish. If this document were indeed genuine, as to all appearance it was, Valentine Hawkehurst and Charlotte Halliday had been married that morning; and the will and the policy of assurance deposited with Mr. Kaye the bill-discounter were so much waste-paper.

And they had fooled him, Philip Sheldon, as easily as this! The furious rage which he felt against all these people, and more than against

them, against his own besotted folly for allowing himself to be so fooled, was a sharper agony than had ever yet rent his cruel heart. He had been a scoundrel all his life, and had felt some of the pains and penalties of his position; but to be a defeated scoundrel was a new sensation to him; and a savage impotent hate and anger against himself and the universe took possession of his mind.

He walked up and down the room for some time, abandoned wholly to the ungovernable rage that consumed him, and with no thought beyond that blind useless fury. And then there came upon him the feeling that was almost a part of his mind—the consciousness that something must be done, and promptly. Whatever his position was, he must face it. His hurried pacing to and fro came to a sudden stop, and he took the crumpled document from his pocket, and examined it once more.

There seemed little doubt that it was genuine; and a visit to the church where the marriage was stated to have been performed would immediately

place the matter beyond all doubt. With the copy of the certificate, he had taken from his pocket the letter that had enclosed it. He saw now that the envelope was addressed in Valentine Hawkehurst's hand.

"Favoured by Dr. Jedd," he had written in a corner of the envelope.

Why should Dr. Jedd "favour" Mr. Hawkehurst's letters? Why indeed, unless there had been a conspiracy concocted by these men against his authority and his interests?

Valentine's letter was brief and business-like.

"SIR,—With the full approbation of her mother and only near relation, my dear Charlotte has this day become my wife. The enclosed attested copy of the certificate of our marriage will afford you all particulars. I shall refrain from entering upon any explanation of my conduct; and I believe such explanation to be wholly unnecessary. You can scarcely fail to understand why I have acted in this manner, and why I congratulate myself and my dear wife on her

departure from your house as on an escape from imminent peril. It will be, I fear, little satisfaction to you to hear that the doctors have pronounced your stepdaughter to be out of danger, though still in very weak health. She is now comfortably established in a temporary home, with her mother and Diana Paget; and in all probability some months must elapse before she and I can begin our new life together. To afford my darling girl the legal protection of marriage was the object of this sudden and secret union. You, of all men, will most fully comprehend how necessary such protection had become to insure her safety.

"Should you, however, require further enlightenment as to the motives that prompted this step, Dr. Jedd will be the fittest person to give you such information; and has expressed his willingness to answer any questions you may please to put to him.

"For the rest, I beg to assure you that the rights of Mrs. Hawkehurst in relation to the inheritance of the late John Haygarth's wealth, will be as carefully protected as those of Miss Halliday;

nor will the hasty marriage of this morning hinder the execution of any deed of settlement calculated to guard her interests in the future.

"With this assurance, I remain, sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"VALENTINE HAWKEHURST.

"Carlyle-terrace, Edgware-road."

Enclosed with this there was a second letter —from his wife.

He read it with a countenance that expressed mingled anger and contempt.

"Fool!" he muttered; "this is about the only service she could do me."

The letter was long and incoherent; blotted with tears—in places completely illegible. Mr. Sheldon cared only to master the main facts contained in it, which were these:

His wife had left him for ever. Dr. Jedd and Valentine Hawkehurst had told her of something —something that affected the safety of her darling and only child—and the knowledge of which must separate her for ever from him. Of the

money which she had brought to him, she claimed nothing. Even her jewels, which were in his keeping, in the iron safe where he kept his papers, she did not attempt to obtain from him. Valentine would not allow her to starve. The humblest shelter, the poorest food, would suffice her in the future; but no home of his providing could she ever inhabit again.

"WHAT I have suffered in this last few days is only known to myself and to heaven," she wrote. "O, Philip, how could you—how could you even shape the thought of such a deed as this, which you have been doing, day after day, for the last two months? I could not have believed what they have told me, if I had not seen my child fade hour by hour under your care, slowly, surely—and recover as surely directly you were excluded from any part in our care of her. If it were possible not to believe these people, I would disbelieve them, and would cling to you faithfully still; but the voices against you are too many, the proofs against you are too strong.

"Do not seek to see me. I am with my poor

child, who was but just able to bear the removal from your house, and to go through the ceremony that was performed this morning. Little did I ever think my daughter would have such a wedding. What a mockery all my plans seem now! and I had chosen the six bridesmaids, and arranged all the dresses in my own mind. To see my dear girl dressed, anyhow, in her oldest bonnet, standing before the altar huddled up in a shawl, and given away by a strange doctor, who kept looking at his watch in a most disrespectful manner during the ceremony, was very bitter to me."

Mr. Sheldon flung aside the letter with an oath. He had no time to waste upon such twaddle as this. He tore open Nancy Woolper's letter. It was a poor honest scrawl, telling him how faithfully she had served him, how truly she had loved him in the past; and how she could henceforth serve him no more. It exhorted him, in humble ill-spelt phrases, to repentance. It might not yet be too late even for such a sinner as he had been.

He tore these two epistles into infinitesimal fragments, and flung them into the fireplace.

Valentine Hawkehurst's letter he kept. It was a document of some legal importance.

For a moment there had flashed across his brain the thought that he might punish these people for their interference with his affairs. He might bring an action against Dr. Jedd for slander, and compel the physician to prove the charges insinuated against him, or pay the penalty attendant upon an unjustifiable accusation. He was well assured that Dr. Jedd could prove very little; and a jury, if properly worked, might award him exemplary damages.

But on the other hand, the circumstantial evidence against him was very strong; and evidence which might be insufficient to prove him guilty in a trial for his life, might be a sufficient defence for his enemies against an action for slander; if indeed the course which Dr. Jedd and Valentine Hawkehurst had taken did in itself constitute a slanderous and malicious imputation. Nor could any such action invalidate the marriage solemnised that morning; and that one fact comprised his utter ruin. Charlotte's interests were merged in

the interests of her husband. No shadow of claim upon John Haygarth's wealth remained to him.

His ruin was complete and dire. For a long time his circumstances had been desperate: no avenue of escape open to him but the one dark way which he had trodden—and now that last road was closed against him. The day was very near at hand when his fictitious bills on shadowy companies must be dishonoured; and with the dishonour of those bills came the end of all things for him; a complete revelation of all those dishonest artifices by which he had kept his piratical bark afloat on the commercial waters.

He surveyed his position in every light, calmly and deliberately, and saw there was no hope. The whole scheme of his existence was reduced to the question of how much ready-money he could carry out of that house in his pocket, and in what direction he should betake himself after leaving it.

His first care must be to ascertain whether the marriage described in the duplicate certificate had really taken place; his next to repossess himself of the papers left with Mr. Kaye.

Before leaving the house he went to his study, where he examined his banker's book. Yes, it was as they had told him at the bank. He was overdrawn. Among the letters lying unopened on his writing-table he found a letter from one of the officials of the Unitas, calling his attention, politely and respectfully, to that oversight upon his part. He read the letter, and crumpled it into his pocket with an angry gesture.

"I am just about as well off now as I was twelve years ago, before Tom Halliday came to Fitzgeorge-street," he said to himself; "and I have the advantage of being twelve years older."

Yes, this is what it all came to, after all. He had been travelling in a circle. The discovery was humiliating. Mr. Sheldon began to think that his line of life had not been a paying one.

He opened his iron safe, and forced the lock of the jewel-case in which his wife had kept the few handsome ornaments that he had given her in the early days of their marriage, as a reward for being good, that is to say, for allowing her second husband to dispose of her first husband's

patrimony without let or hindrance. The jewels were only a few rings, a brooch, a pair of earrings, and a bracelet; but they were good of their kind, and in all worth something like two hundred pounds.

These, and the gold chronometer which he carried in his waistcoat-pocket, constituted all the worldly wealth which Mr. Sheldon could command, now that the volcanic ground upon which his commercial position had been built began to crumble beneath his feet, and the bubbling of the crater warned him of his peril. He put the trinkets into his pocket without compunction, and then went upstairs to his dressing-room, where he proceeded to pack his clothes in a capacious portmanteau, which in itself might constitute his credentials among strangers, so eminently respectable was its appearance.

In this dread crisis of his life he thought of everything that affected his own interests. To what was he going? That question was for the moment unanswerable. In every quarter of the globe there are happy hunting-grounds for the

soldier of fortune. Some plan for the future would shape itself in his mind by and by. His wife's desertion had left him thoroughly independent. He had no tie to restrain his movements, nothing to dread except such proceedings as might be taken against him by the holders of those bills. And such proceedings are slow, while modern locomotion is swift.

What was he leaving? That was easily answered. A labyrinth of debt and difficulty. The fine house, the handsome furniture, were held in the same bondage of the law as his household goods in Fitzgeorge-street had been. He had given a bill of sale upon everything he possessed six months before, to obtain ready-money. The final terrible resource had not been resorted to until all other means had been exhausted. Let this fact at least be recorded to his credit. He was like the lady whom the poet sings, who,

> "tolerably mild,
> To make a wash would *hardly* boil a child :"

that is to say, she would try all other materials for her cosmetic preparation first; and if they

failed, would at last resort, unwillingly, to the boiling of children.

No; he had nothing to lose by flight—of that fact it was easy for him to assure himself.

He went downstairs, and rang for the servant.

"I am going out," he said, "to join my wife and her daughter, and return with them to the sea-side. There is a portmanteau upstairs in my room, ready packed. You will give it to the messenger I shall send in the course of the next day or two. At what time did Mrs. Sheldon and Miss Halliday leave this morning?"

"At eight o'clock, sir. Mr. Hawkehurst came to fetch them in a carriage. They went out by the kitchen-passage and the side-gate, sir, because you were asleep, Mrs. Woolper said, and was not to be disturbed."

"At eight. Yes. And Mrs. Woolper and Miss Paget?"

"They went a'most directly after you was gone out, sir. There was two cabs to take Miss Halliday's and Mrs. Sheldon's things, and such-

like. Just as there was when you came from Harold's-hill."

"Yes; I understand."

He was half inclined to ask the young woman if she had heard the direction given to the drivers of these two cabs. But he refrained from doing so. What could it profit him to know where his wife and stepdaughter were to be found? Whether they were in the next street or at the antipodes could matter very little to him, except so far as the knowledge of their place of habitation might guide him in his avoidance of them. Between him and them there was a gulf wider than all the waters of the world, and to consider them was only foolish waste of time and thought. He left the house which for the last five years of his life had been the outward and visible sign of his social status, fully conscious that he left it for ever; and he left it without a sigh. For him the word home had no tender associations, and the domestic hearth had never inspired him with any sense of comfort or pleasure with which he might not have been inspired by the luxurious fireside of

a first-class coffee-room. He was a man who would have chosen to spend his existence in joint-stock hotels, if there had not been solidity of position to be acquired from the possession of a handsome house.

He went to the Paddington church. It was only five o'clock in the afternoon by the clock of that edifice. The church was closely shut, but Mr. Sheldon found the clerk, who in consideration of a handsome donation, took him to the vestry, and there showed him the register of marriages—the last entry therein.

Yes, there was Charlotte Halliday's signature, a little uncertain and tremulous.

"I suppose you are one of the young lady's relations, sir," said the clerk. "It was rather a strange affair: but the young lady's ma was with her; and the young lady was over age; so, you see, there's nothing to be said against it."

Mr. Sheldon had nothing to say against the marriage. If any false statement of his, however base or cruel, could have invalidated the ceremonial, he would have spared no pains to devise

such a falsehood. If he had been a citizen of the Southern States, he might have suborned witnesses to prove that there was black blood in the veins of Valentine Hawkehurst. If he had not been opposed to so strong an opponent as Dr. Jedd, he might have tried to get a commission of lunacy to declare Charlotte Halliday a madwoman, and thus invalidate her marriage. As it was, he knew that he could do nothing. He had failed. All was said in those three words.

He wasted no time at the church, but hurried on to the City, where he was just in time to catch Mr. Kaye leaving his office.

"Have you sent those papers to your solicitor?" he asked.

"No; I was just going to take them round to him. I have been thinking that it will be necessary to ascertain that there is no will of Miss Halliday's subsequent to this; and that will be rather difficult to find out. Women never know when to leave off making wills, if they once begin making them. They have a positive rage for multiplying documents, you know. If

the testator in that great codicil case had been a woman, a jury would scarcely have refused to believe in the story of half a dozen different codicils hidden away in half a dozen different holes and corners. Women like that sort of thing. Of course, I quite understand that you bring me the will in all good faith; but I foresee difficulties in raising money upon such a security."

"You need give yourself no further trouble about the matter," said Mr. Sheldon coolly. "I find that I can do without the money, and I've come to reclaim the papers."

Mr. Kaye handed them to his client. He was not altogether pleased by this turn of affairs; for he had expected to profit considerably by Mr. Sheldon's necessities. That gentleman honoured him with no further explanations, but put the papers in his pocket, and wished the bill-discounter good-day.

And this was the last time that Philip Sheldon was ever seen in his character of a solid and respectable citizen of London. He went from the

bill-discounter's office to a pawnbroker in the City, with whom he pledged Georgy's trinkets and his own watch for the sum of a hundred and twenty pounds. From the pawnbroker's he went back to Bayswater for his portmanteau, and thence to the Euston Hotel, where he dined temperately in the coffee-room. After dinner he went out into the dull back streets that lurk behind Euston-square, and found an obscure little barber's shop, where he had his whiskers shaved off, and his hyacinthine locks cropped as close as the barber's big scissors could crop them.

The sacrifice of these hirsute adornments made an extraordinary change in this man. All the worst characteristics of his countenance came out with a new force; and the face of Mr. Sheldon, undisguised by the whiskers that had hidden the corners of his mouth, or the waving locks that had given height and breadth to his forehead, was a face that no one would be likely to trust.

From the Euston station he departed by the night-mail for Liverpool, under the cover of darkness. In that city he quietly awaited the depar-

ture of the Cunard steamer for New York, and was so fortunate as to leave England one day before that fatal date on which the first of his fictitious bills arrived at maturity.

Book the Ninth.

HARBOUR, AFTER MANY SHIPWRECKS.

CHAPTER I.

OUT OF THE DARK VALLEY.

Not with pomp or with splendour, with rejoicing or strewing of summer blossoms in the pathway of bride and bridegroom, had the marriage of Valentine and Charlotte been solemnised. Simple and secret had been the ceremonial, dark with clouds was the sky above them; and yet it is doubtful if happier bridegroom ever trod this earth than Valentine Hawkehurst as he went to his lonely lodging under the starry summer sky, after leaving his young wife to her mother's care in the new home that had been found for them.

He had reason to rejoice; for he had passed through the valley of the shadow of death. He had seen, very near, that dread presence before which the angels of faith and love can avail

nothing. Fearless as Alcides had he gone down to the realms of darkness; triumphant and glad as the demi-god he returned from the underworld bearing his precious burden in his strong arms. The struggle had been dire, the agony of suspense a supreme torture; but from the awful contest the man came forth a better and a wiser man. Whatever strength of principle had been wanting to complete the work of reformation inaugurated by love, had been gained by Valentine Hawkehurst during the period of Charlotte's illness. His promised wife, his redeeming angel, she for whose affection he had first learned to render thanks to his God, had seemed to be slipping away from him. In the happiest hour of his prosperous courtship he had known himself unworthy of her, with no right, no claim to so fair a prize, except the right of pure and unselfish love.

When the hour of trial came to him he had said, "Behold the avenger!" and in that hour it seemed to him that a lurking anticipation of future woe had been ever present with him in

the midst of his happiness. It seemed so natural, so reasonable that this treasure should be taken away from him. What had he done, that he should go unpunished for all the errors and follies of his youth?

He looked back and asked himself if he had been so vile a sinner as in these hours of self-reproach he was inclined to esteem himself? Could his life have been otherwise? Had he not been set in a groove, his young feet planted in the crooked ways, before he knew that life's journey might be travelled by a straighter road?

Alas, the answer given at the tribunal of conscience went against him. Other men had come into this world amidst surroundings as bad, nay indeed worse than the surroundings of his cradle. And of these men some had emerged from their native mire spotless and pure as from newly-fallen snow. The natural force of character which had saved these men had not been given to him. His feet had been set in the crooked ways, and he had travelled on, reckless, defiant, dimly conscious that the road was a bad one,

and that his garments were bespattered with more mud-stains than would be agreeable to some travellers.

It was only when the all-powerful influence of love was brought to bear upon this plastic nature that Valentine Hawkehurst became fully awakened to the degradation of his position, and possessed with an earnest desire to emerge from the great dismal swamp of bad company. Then, and then only, began the transformation which was ultimately to become so complete a change. Some influence, even beyond that of happy love, was needed to give force to this man's character; and in the great terror of the last three months that influence had been found. The very foundations of Valentine Hawkehurst's life had been shaken, and, come what might, he could never be again what he had been.

He had almost lost her. All was said in that. She had been almost taken from him—she, who to this man was father, mother, wife, household, past, present, future, glory, ambition, happiness, everything except that God who ruled above and

held her life and his peace in the hollow of His hand. He had been face to face with death; and never, in all the years to come—never, in the brightest hour of future happiness, could he forget the peril that had come upon him, and might come again. He had learned to understand that he held her, not as a free gift, but as a loan; a treasure to be reclaimed at any moment by the God who lent her.

The darksome valley was past, and Valentine stood by his darling's side, safe upon the sunlit uplands.

The doctors had declared their patient safe. The hour of danger had been passed in safety, and the mischief worked by the poisoner's slow process had been well-nigh counteracted by medical skill.

"In six weeks' time you may take your wife for her honeymoon tour, Mr. Hawkehurst, with her health and spirits thoroughly reëstablished," said Dr. Jedd.

"What is that you say about honeymoon tours?" cried Gustave Lenoble. "Hawkehurst

and his wife will spend their honeymoon at Côte-noir; is it not, Diana?"

Diana replied that it was to be, and must be so.

It was impossible to imagine a happier party than that which met day after day in those pleasant lodgings at Kilburn, wherein Georgy, and Diana, and Charlotte had been established with much devotion and care on the parts of Valentine and Gustave. Mr. Hawkehurst had chosen the apartments, and M. Lenoble had spent the day before the wedding in rushing to and fro between the West-end and Kilburn, carrying hot-house flowers, comestibles of all kinds from Fortnum and Mason's, bonbon-boxes, perfumery, new books, new music, and superintending the delivery of luxurious easy-chairs hired from expensive upholsterers', a grand piano, and a harmonium.

"We will have music in the evenings," he said to Diana, upon her expressing surprise on beholding these arrangements, "when we are assembled here, all. How thou dost open thine

eyes on beholding these nothings! Do you think it has been no pleasure to me to testify my affection for one who has been so good to thee—thy friend, thine adopted sister? I wished that all things should look bright around her, when they brought her here, after that she had come to escape from the jaws of death. And thou, was it not that thou wert also coming to make thy home here for some days, until thy day of marriages? Thy father astonishes himself to hear of such sudden events. Thou wilt go to see him, soon, is it not?"

"Yes, dear Gustave. I will go to-morrow."

She went on the next day, and found Captain Paget much weaker than on her last visit.

It was evident that for him the end was very near. He was much changed and subdued by his long illness; but the spirit of worldliness had not been altogether exorcised even in this dismal period of self-communion.

"What does it all mean, Diana?" he asked. "I don't understand being kept in the dark like this. Here are you suddenly leaving Mr. Shel-

don's house without rhyme or reason, to take up your quarters in lodgings with Mrs. Sheldon. Here is a mysterious marriage taking place at a time when I have been given to understand that one of the parties is at death's door; and here is Lenoble introduced to Valentine Hawkehurst, in express opposition to my particular request that my future son-in-law should be introduced to none of the Sheldon set."

"Valentine is not one of the Sheldon set, papa. I do not think it likely that he will ever see Philip Sheldon again."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Captain Paget. "There has been something serious going on, then, surely?"

After this he insisted on an explanation, and Diana told him the story of the last two or three weeks: Charlotte's increasing illness—so mysterious and incurable — the sudden return from Harold's-hill; Valentine's fears, Dr. Jedd's boldly-expressed opinion that the patient was the victim of foul-play; the systematic exclusion of Philip Sheldon from the sick-room, followed immediately

by symptoms of amelioration, leading to gradual recovery.

All this Captain Paget heard with an awe-stricken countenance. The distance that divides the shedder of blood from all other wrong-doers is so great that the minor sinner feels himself a saint when he contemplates the guilt of the greater criminal.

"Great God! is this possible?" exclaimed the Captain with a shudder. "And I have taken that man's hand!"

Later in the evening, when Diana had left him, and he had been thinking seriously of his own career, and those many transactions of his troubled life which, in the slang denomination of the day, would be called "shady," he derived some scrap of comfort from one consideration.

"I never hurt a worm," he murmured to himself complacently. "No, I can lay my hand upon my heart and say I never hurt a worm."

The Captain did not pause to reflect that some of the merit involved in this amiable trait of character might have been referable to the

fact that he had never happened to fall upon a state of society in which a comfortable living was to be made by the hurting of worms. He thought only of the story he had heard about Philip Sheldon; and he told himself that not in the direst necessity of his life could his brain have fashioned the thought of such a deed as that, in the doing of which this man had persevered for nearly three months.

For Charlotte Hawkehurst the summer days which succeeded her marriage passed very quietly. She had not been told the real motive of that hasty and stolen marriage which had given her to the man she loved and trusted so completely. Valentine and Diana had between them contrived to mould Mrs. Sheldon to their will; and it was at her request that Charlotte had consented to so strange a step.

The fable invented to account for this desire on the part of Mrs. Sheldon was very innocent. The doctors had ordered a milder climate than England for the dear convalescent, — Madeira,

Algeria, Malta,—or some other equally remote quarter of the globe. It was impossible that Mr. or Mrs. Shelden could take so long a journey; Mr. Sheldon being bound hand and foot to the mill-wheel of City life, Mrs. Sheldon being the slave and helpmeet of her husband. Nor could dear Charlotte go to Malta alone, or attended only by faithful Diana Paget. In short, there was no course so obvious or so prudent as a hasty marriage, which would enable the invalid to seek a milder clime, accompanied and guarded by her natural protector—a husband.

"Consent, dearest, I entreat you," wrote Valentine, in the little note which supported Mrs. Sheldon's request, "however strange our wishes may seem to you. Believe that it is for the best, for your own sake, for the sake of all who love you, and ask no questions. Say only, yes."

To the prayer in this letter, to the entreaties of her mother and Diana, Charlotte yielded. She wondered why Mr. Sheldon avoided her, and asked anxiously, on more than one occasion, why she did not see that gentleman.

"Is papa ill," she asked, "that he never comes to see how I am?"

"The doctors have forbidden many people in your room, dear."

"Yes, a few days ago, when I was so very ill; but now that I am better, papa might come. I want to thank him for all his anxious care of me, and to be sure that *he* consents to this marriage."

"My darling, be assured the marriage is for the best," pleaded Diana.

And the marriage took place.

Charlotte's innocent soul was thus spared the pain of a revelation which must have cast a dark shadow on the bright beginning of her wedded life. Georgy pledged herself to keep the fatal secret from her daughter; and Diana Paget rewarded her discretion by the most patient attention to her piteous and prosy lamentations upon the iniquity of mankind in general and Philip Sheldon in particular.

Of that hideous secret of the past, lately revealed by Mr. Burkham, Mrs. Sheldon had been told nothing. No good end could have been

served by such a revelation. The criminal law has its statute of limitations; unwritten, but not the less existent. A crime which would have been difficult of proof at the time of its commission must after the lapse of twelve years have travelled beyond the pale of justice. For three people to come forward and declare that at the time of Mr. Halliday's death they had suspected Mr. Sheldon of poisoning him, would be to prove nothing to the minds of a British jury, except that the three people in question were libellous and ill-disposed persons. The greater the issue, the wider the chances of escape given to the accused; and a petty offender will be condemned for picking a pocket upon much lighter grounds than will be considered sufficient to prove a man guilty of blowing up the houses of parliament.

CHAPTER II.

AFTER THE WEDDING.

The manner in which Mr. Sheldon would act in the future was a matter of considerable fear to his wife. She had a hazy idea that he would come to the pleasant Kilburn lodgings to claim her, and insist upon her sharing his dreary future.

"If I could only have a divorce," she said piteously, when she discussed the subject with her son-in-law. "There ought to be divorces for such dreadful things; but I never heard of one before Sir Creswick Creswick, or the new judge, whose name I can't remember. O, Valentine, I cannot live with him; I cannot sit down to dinner day after day with such a man as that. And to think that I should have known him when I was the merest girl, and have danced my very first polka with him when it first came in, and

people wore polka boots and polka jackets, and wrote their notes of invitation upon polka paper, and sang polka songs, and worked polking peasants in Berlin wool, and went on altogether in the most absurd manner. And O, Valentine, whom can one trust, if not the man one has known all one's life?"

Mr. Hawkehurst pledged himself to protect his mother-in-law from any attempt at persecution upon the part of her husband. He did not know what difficulties he might have to encounter in the performance of this pledge; for in his ignorance of the stockbroker's desperate circumstances he imagined that Philip Sheldon would make some attempt to right himself in the eyes of the world, by compelling his wife to reassume her position in his house.

He went to George Sheldon's office within a few days after his marriage to take counsel from that astute adviser. He found the lawyer hard at work, and in very good spirits. It was by his advice the marriage had been hurried on; Charlotte's stealthy removal from the house while

Philip Sheldon slumbered had been planned by him; and he was triumphant in the thought that the plot had succeeded so well, and that Philip, the coolest and deepest of schemers, had been so completely baffled.

"That Ann Woolper is a treasure," he said; "I didn't think it was in her to do what she has done. Nothing could be neater than the way she kept Phil at bay; and nothing could be better than her tact and cleverness in getting Charlotte and her mother quietly off the other morning while my precious brother was in the land of nod."

"Yes, she has been invaluable to us."

"And that girl Paget, too; she has turned out a regular trump. I used to think her a very stiff, consequential piece of goods when I saw her at the Lawn; but, egad, she has shown herself the genuine metal all through this business. Now that's a young woman I wouldn't mind making Mrs. George Sheldon any day in the week."

"You do her too much honour," said Valentine with an internal shiver. "Unhappily, a prior

engagement will prevent Miss Paget's availing herself of so excellent an opportunity."

"It mayn't be such a very bad chance as you seem to think it, my friend," George replied with some indignation. "Whenever the Reverend John Haygarth's estate drops in, I stand to win fifty thousand pounds. And that's not so bad for a start in life. I suppose you haven't forgotten that your wife is heir-at-law to a hundred thousand pounds?"

"No, I have not forgotten her position in relation to the Haygarth estate."

"Humph! I should rather think not. People don't generally forget that kind of thing. But you are uncommonly cool about the business."

"Yes, I have passed through a fiery furnace in which all the bullion in the Bank of England will not serve a man. That kind of ordeal upsets one's old notions as to the value of money. And, again, I have never been able to contemplate Charlotte's inheritance of that fortune as anything but a remote contingency; the business is so slow."

"Yes, but it has been going on. Affidavits have been made; the whole affair is in progress."

"I am glad to hear it. Don't think that I pretend not to value the prospect of wealth; I have only learnt to know that money is not the be-all and end-all of life. I could be very happy with my dear wife if there were no prospect of this Haygarthian inheritance; but if it does come to us, we shall, no doubt, be all the happier. The millionaire sees the world from a very pleasant point of view. I should like my dear girl to be the mistress of as fair a home as money can buy for her."

"Yes, and you'd like to have your name stand high in the statistics of Government stockholders. Don't be sentimental, Hawkehurst; that kind of thing won't wash. Thank God, we managed to save poor Tom's daughter from the fangs of my brother Phil. But you can't suppose that I am going to shut my eyes to the fact that this affair has been a very good thing for you, and that you owe your chances of a

great fortune entirely to me? You don't pretend to forget *that*, I suppose?" said George Sheldon with some acrimony.

"Why should I pretend to forget that, or any circumstance of our business relations? I am perfectly aware that you started the hunt of the Haygarths; and that to your investigations is to be traced the discovery that proves my wife a claimant to the estate now held by the Crown."

"Very good; that's outspoken and honest, at any rate. And now, how about our agreement? It's only a parole agreement, but an honest man's word is as good as his bond."

"Our agreement!" repeated Valentine with a puzzled expression of countenance. "Upon my word, I forget."

"Ah, I thought it would come to that; I thought you would manage to forget the terms agreed upon by you and me in the event of your marriage with Charlotte Halliday. My memory is not so short as yours; and I can swear to a conversation between you and me in this room,

in which you consented to my taking half the Haygarthian estate as the price of my discovery and the fair reward of my labours."

"Yes," said Valentine, "I remember that conversation; and I remember saying that the demand was a stiff one, but that I, as Charlotte's future husband, would not oppose such a demand."

"You remember that?"

"I do; and if my wife is willing to consent to your terms, I will hold to my promise."

"Your wife's consent is not wanted. She married you without a settlement, and her rights are merged in yours. To all intents and purposes, *you* are heir-at-law to John Haygarth's estate."

Valentine laughed aloud; the whole affair seemed a tremendous joke. He, the homeless, penniless, friendless reprobate of but one year ago —he, the son and heir of a man who had been always on the verge of social shipwreck for want of five pounds—he, of all other men upon this earth, claimant against the Crown for an estate worth one hundred thousand pounds!

"The whole affair seems ridiculously improbable," he said.

"My brother wouldn't have done what he did if the whole thing had seemed improbable to him. However, we needn't estimate the chances for or against; all I want is a legal agreement between you and me, securing my share of the plunder."

"I am ready to execute any reasonable agreement; but I am bound to protect my wife's interests, and I must have a solicitor to act for me in this affair. Greek must meet Greek, you know."

"Very good. I could have conducted the business myself without the interference of strangers; but if you are going in for extreme caution, you'd better leave your wife's affairs in the hands of Messrs. Greenwood and Greenwood, who have acted for her hitherto and have all papers relating to the case in their possession."

"Greenwood and Greenwood? My dear girl told me she had signed some document, and had seen some lawyers; but she did not tell me the nature of the document, or the name of the

lawyers. I have forborne to speak to her on business matters. The treatment that she has undergone has left her very nervous, and we try to keep all unpleasant subjects out of her mind."

"Yes, that's all very well; but business is business, you know. You'd better see Messrs. Greenwood and Greenwood at once. Tell them of your marriage. You'll have to keep Phil's conduct dark, of course; that is understood between us. You must say the marriage was a love-match against my brother's wish, romantic, sentimental, and so on. They'll raise no objections when they find you are willing to leave the case in their hands."

"You have heard nothing of your brother?"

"Well, no—nothing, or next to nothing. I called at his office yesterday. He has not been there since the beginning of Charlotte's illness, and there has been no letter or message for Orcott since your wedding-day. Things look rather piscatorial, altogether. Orcott hints that Phil's affairs are in queer street; but he's a shallow-headed fool, and knows very little. It

seems, by his account, that Phil was a Bull, and that the fall in every species of stock has been ruin to him. You see, when a man once goes in for the Bull business, he never by any chance turns Bear—and *vice versa*. There's a kind of infatuation in the thing, and a man sticks to his line until he's cleaned out; at least, that's what stockbrokers have told me—and I believe it's pretty near the truth."

This was all that Valentine could ascertain about Mr. Sheldon, at present. Every knock fluttered Georgy; every accidental visitor at the Kilburn villa seemed like the swooping of eagle on dovecote.

"I cannot get over the feeling that he will come and take me away with him," she said. "If Sir Wilde Creswick would only do something, so that my second husband mayn't be able to insist upon my living in that dreadful, dreadful house, where I suffered such nights and days of agony, that I am convinced the sight of chintz curtains lined with pink will make me wretched as long as I live!"

"My dear Mrs. Sheldon, he shall not come," said Valentine.

"If I could only go ever so far away from him, and feel that there was the sea or something of that kind between us!"

"We will take you away—across the British Channel, or further still, if you like. Diana and M. Lenoble are to be married soon; and directly Lotta is strong enough for the journey we are to go over to Normandy, to their château."

"Château, indeed!" Mrs. Sheldon exclaimed peevishly. "The idea of Diana Paget, without a sixpence, and with a regular scamp of a father, marrying a man with a château, while my poor Charlotte—! I don't wish to wound your feelings, Mr. Hawkehurst, but it really does seem hard."

"It is hard that Lotta should not have married a prince—all the grandeurs of a prince in a fairy tale would only be her due; but it happens fortunately, you see, dear Mrs. Sheldon, that our sweet girl has simple tastes, and does not languish

for jewels or palaces. If she should ever become rich—"

"Ah," sighed Georgy despondently, "I don't expect that. I can't understand anything about this idea of a fine fortune that Mr. Sheldon had got into his head. I know that my husband's mother was a Miss Meynell, the daughter of a carpet-warehouseman in the City, and I can't see how any grand fortune is to come to Charlotte through her. And as for the Hallidays—Hyley and Newhall farms were all the property they ever owned within the memory of man."

"The fortune for which Charlotte is a claimant comes from the maternal ancestor of Christian Meynell. I do not count upon her possession of it as a certain good in the future. If it comes, we will be thankful."

"Is it a very large sum of money?"

"Well, yes; I believe it is a considerable sum."

"Twenty thousand pounds, perhaps?"

"I have been told that it is as much."

He did not want Georgy's weak mind to be-

come possessed by the idea of shadowy wealth. He remembered what Philip Sheldon had said to him on the Christmas night in which they had paced the little Bayswater garden together, and he felt that there was a substratum of common sense in that scoundrel's artful warning.

CHAPTER III.

GREEK AGAINST GREEK.

Valentine Hawkehurst called upon Mr. Greenwood, of the firm of Greenwood and Greenwood, within a week of his marriage, and exhibited the certificate to that gentleman. Mr. Greenwood received the information with much solemnity, and even severity, of manner.

"Are you aware that this is a very serious step which you have taken, Mr. Hawkehurst?" he demanded sternly. "You entrap—that is to say, you persuade a lady into a hasty marriage—without consultation with her legal advisers, without settlements of any kind whatever—while at the same time you are aware that the lady in question is heir-at-law to a very large fortune, proceedings for the recovery of which are now pending. Pardon me if I observe that there is

a want of delicacy—of—a—hem—right-mindedness in the transaction."

"The imputation contained in your remarks is not a pleasant one, Mr. Greenwood," Valentine remarked quietly; "but I am quite willing to pardon any injustice which you may inflict upon me by your desire to protect the interests of your client. I think you will speedily discover that those interests are in no way endangered by the lady's marriage with me. There are social complications which are not to be settled by either law or equity. Miss Halliday's surroundings of the last few months were of a very painful nature; so painful, that the legal protection of marriage became the only means of saving her from imminent peril. I cannot enter more fully into those painful circumstances. I can only assure you that I married your client with the consent and approval of her only near relation, and uninfluenced in the smallest degree by mercenary considerations. Whatever post-nuptial settlement you please to make for my wife's protection, I shall promptly execute."

"You express yourself in a very honourable and highly creditable manner, Mr. Hawkehurst," exclaimed the lawyer with sudden cordiality; "and I beg distinctly to withdraw any offensive observations I may have made just now. Your own affairs are, I conclude, in a sufficiently solvent state?"

"I do not owe a sixpence."

"Good; and Mr. Sheldon, the lady's stepfather and my client; had you his approval for this hasty marriage?"

"The marriage took place without Mr. Sheldon's knowledge or consent."

"May I ask your reason for this secrecy?"

"No, Mr. Greenwood; it is just that one reason that I cannot tell you. Accept my assurance that it was an all-powerful reason."

"I am compelled to do so, if you decline to confide in my discretion; but as Mr. Sheldon is my client, I am bound to think of his interests as well as those of Miss Halliday—er—Mrs. Hawkehurst. I am somewhat surprised that he has not called upon me since the marriage. He

has been made aware of that circumstance, I suppose?"

"Yes; I wrote to him immediately after the ceremony, enclosing him a copy of the certificate."

"The marriage will make a considerable difference to him."

"In what manner?"

"Well, in the event of his stepdaughter's death. If she had died unmarried and intestate, this fortune would have gone to her mother; besides which, there was the insurance on Miss Halliday's life."

"An insurance!"

"Yes. Were you not apprised of that fact? Mr. Sheldon, with very natural precaution, insured his stepdaughter's life for a considerable sum—in point of fact, as I believe, five thousand pounds; so that, in case of her death prior to the recovery of the Haygarth estate, her mother might receive some solatium."

"He had insured her life!" said Valentine under his breath.

This, then, was the key to the mystery. The Haygarthian inheritance was but a remote contingency, a shadowy prize, which could scarcely have tempted the secret assassin; but the insurance had offered the prospect of immediate gain. The one link wanting to complete the chain of evidence against Philip Sheldon was found. There was no longer a question as to his motive.

"This man knows of one insurance on her life," Valentine thought to himself; "there may have been more than one."

After a brief silence, in which Mr. Hawkehurst had been lost in thought, the lawyer proceeded to discuss the terms of the post-nuptial settlement necessary for the protection of his client's interests. In the course of this discussion Valentine explained his position in relation to George Sheldon, and stated the demands of that sharp practitioner.

Mr. Greenwood was utterly aghast upon hearing Mr. Hawkehurst's views on this subject.

"You mean to tell me that this man claims a clear half of the Haygarth estate—fifty thou-

sand pounds—in consideration of his paltry discoveries!"

"Such is the demand he has made, and which I have pledged myself not to oppose. He certainly does open his mouth very wide; but we are bound to consider that but for these discoveries of his, my wife and my wife's relatives would in all probability have gone down to their graves in ignorance of their claim to this estate."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Hawkehurst. If Mr. George Sheldon had not made the discovery, someone else would have made it sooner or later, depend upon it. There would have been a little loss of time, that is all. There are plenty of men of George Sheldon's class always on the look-out for such chances as this,—and for very small chances in comparison to this. Why, I know a fellow, a Frenchman, called Fleurus, who will take as much trouble about a few hundred pounds worth of unclaimed stock as this man, George Sheldon, has taken about the Haygarth succession. And he has really the impudence to claim fifty thousand pounds from you?"

"A claim which I have pledged myself not to oppose."

"But which you have not pledged yourself to support. My dear Mr. Hawkehurst, this is a business which you must allow me to settle for you, as your wife's legal adviser. We will consider you quite out of the question, if you please; you will thus come out of your relations to Mr. George Sheldon with perfectly clean hands. You will not oppose his claim; but I shall oppose him in my character of legal adviser to your wife. Why, are you aware that this man executed an agreement with his brother, consenting to receive a fifth share of the estate, and costs out of pocket, in complete acquittance of all claims? I have an abstract of the agreement amongst Miss Halliday's—Mrs. Hawkehurst's papers."

After some further discussion, Valentine agreed to leave the whole matter in Mr. Greenwood's hands. Greek must meet Greek. Gray's Inn and the Fields must settle this business between themselves.

"I am only prince consort," he said with a smile. "I pretend to no actual interest in my wife's estate. I doubt, indeed, whether I should not have felt more complete happiness in our marriage if she had not been heiress to so large a fortune."

At this Mr. Greenwood laughed outright.

"Come, come, Mr. Hawkehurst," he exclaimed, "that really won't do. I am an old stager, you know—a man of the world; and you mustn't ask me to believe that the idea of your wife's expectations can afford you anything but unqualified satisfaction."

"You cannot believe? No, perhaps not," Valentine answered thoughtfully. "But you do not know how nearly these expectations have lost me my wife. And even now, when she is mine by virtue of a bond that only death can loosen, it seems to me as if her wealth would make a kind of division between us. There are people who will always consider me a lucky adventurer, and look at my marriage as the result of clever scheming. I cannot advertise to the world the

fact that I loved Charlotte Halliday from the first hour in which I saw her, and asked her to be my wife three days before I discovered her claim to John Haygarth's estate. A man can't go through the world with his justification pinned upon his breast. I think it will be my fate to be misjudged all my life. A twelvemonth ago I cared very little about the opinions of my fellow-men; but I want to be worthy of my wife in the esteem of mankind, as well as in the depths of my own moral consciousness."

"Go and finish your honeymoon," said the lawyer, digging his client in the ribs with elephantine playfulness; "the moon must be in her first quarter, I should think. Go along with you; and leave me to tackle Mr. George Sheldon."

CHAPTER IV.

ONLY A DREAM.

"I SAY, Lenoble," Captain Paget began abruptly one afternoon when his daughter and his future son-in-law were in attendance upon his sofa, "when are you and Diana to be married? There is nothing to hinder your marriage now, you know."

Diana looked at the speaker with a grave countenance.

"Dear papa, there can be no marriage while you are so ill," she said gently.

"And afterwards, when I'm gone, you won't like to marry within six months of your father's funeral; and you will be left alone in the world. You can't hang on to Hawkehurst and his wife. The best thing you can do, Lenoble, is to marry her out of hand, and let me see her by my bedside

as Madame Lenoble of Côtenoir. It will be some consolation for me to see that day. I thought to have shared your home, with a run to Paris occasionally just to freshen myself up a little; but that's all over now. It does seem rather hard to me sometimes; and I think of Moses, and his forty years in the Desert with those ill-conditioned Israelites, who were always getting into some scrape or other—setting up golden calves, and that kind of thing—if he turned his back on them for twenty-four hours. A pack of ungrateful beggars too, always ready for mutiny—regular radicals, begad! And he went through it all: the sand, and the *toujours* quails, and the ingratitude; and after forty years of it, when he saw the Promised Land stretched before him green and fertile on the other side of the river—he died! I've been through my desert, the dreary wanderings over the barren sand, and the ingratitude of men I've served. Yes, I've gone through it all; and just as I catch a glimpse of Canaan, the curtain drops."

On this they comforted him; and sustained

him with the promise of a brighter Canaan than Côtenoir.

"Yes," he said in a dreamy voice, "I read about it very often. A city with foundations of jasper and chalcedony, emerald and sardonyx; gates of pearl, pavements of gold. That's what St. John the Evangelist saw in his vision; and we've only *his* word for it. But there's something that I can believe and can understand: 'In my Father's house there are many mansions.' There's more hope for a sinful man of the world in that promise than in all St. John's dreams about gates of pearl and foundations of emerald."

The Captain was failing fast. He had exchanged his easy-chair for a sofa now; and the time seemed near at hand when he must exchange the sofa for his bed. After that there would remain but one last change, to the contemplation whereof the sick man was becoming daily more reconciled.

He had read his Gospel more diligently of late, and had taken comfort from those sublime pages. Do they not contain consolation, hope, promise,

for all—for the weary man of the world as well as for the saint? There is to be found the only creed that can adapt itself to every condition of life, and has a margin wide enough for every weakness of erring humanity. Buddhism may contain a scheme of morality almost as perfect; Mahomet may have expounded hopes that seem well-nigh as divine; but in the Gospel is the only system that will adapt itself at once to the culture of the spiritual man, and the active life of the practical worker in this lower world.

Gustave Lenoble was only too glad to claim his promised wife a little sooner than he had hoped to claim her. "Thou hast put me off long enough, cruel," he said; "and now it is thy father's wish that our marriage should be soon. It shall be this week; I will take no longer thine excuses. We shall be the sooner ready to receive thy friends, thy Charlotte and her Hawkehurst."

Diana smiled.

"Dear Gustave, you are always kind," she said.

It was very sweet to her to think that her new home would afford a pleasant haven for that dear friend who had sheltered her. And with Charlotte, the dear adopted sister, would come the man she had once loved, to share whose cares had once been her brightest dream.

She wondered at her own inconstancy on perceiving how completely the dream had flown. Before the stern realities of life—before sickness and sorrow, and the dread shadow of death—that schoolgirl's vision had utterly melted away. It is just possible that Gustave's manly outspoken love may have helped to blot from the tablet of her mind the fantastic picture of the life that might have been. She scarcely knew whether this was so; but she did know that a new and happier existence began for her from the hour in which she gave her heart in all truth and loyalty to Gustave Lenoble.

The wedding was arranged to take place within a week of Captain Paget's expressly declared wish. It was to be solemnised at a church near Knightsbridge, and again at a Catholic chapel in the neigh-

bourhood of Sloane-street; by which double ceremonial a knot would be tied that no legal quibble could hereafter loosen. Charlotte was just sufficiently recovered to obtain permission to be present at the ceremonial, after some little exercise of her persuasive powers with the medical practitioner to whose care Dr. Jedd had committed her when all danger was past.

The Captain protested, with an eager insistence, that the wedding-breakfast should be eaten at his domicile.

"And Val," he said, "be sure Val is with you. I have a secret to tell him; a kind of atonement to make. Some news to give him that he won't quite relish, perhaps. But that's no fault of mine."

"No bad news, I hope, papa; for Charlotte's sake as well as for Valentine's?"

"That depends upon how they both take it. Your friend Charlotte is not particularly fond of money, is she?"

"Fond of money, papa? A baby knows as much of the value of money as Lotta. Except to

give to beggars in the streets, or to buy pretty frivolous presents for her friends, she has neither use nor desire for money. She is the most generous, most disinterested of created beings."

"I'm very glad to hear it," said the Captain drily. "And how about Hawkehurst, now? Do you think it was a real love-match, his marriage with Miss Halliday? No *arrière pensée*—no looking out for the main chance at the bottom of his romantic attachment, eh, Di?"

"No, papa. I am sure there was never truer love than his. I saw him under most trying circumstances, and I can pledge myself for the truth of his devotion."

"I am very glad to hear it. Be sure you bring Hawkehurst and his wife to my little breakfast. A chicken, a pine, a bottle of sparkling hock, and a fond father's blessing, are all I shall give you: but the chicken and the hock will be from Gunter, and the blessing from the bottom of a paternal heart."

Bright shone the day that gave Diana to her

husband, and very beautiful looked the bride in her simple dress. Gustave Lenoble's marriage was no less quietly performed than that union which had secured the safety of Charlotte Halliday and the happiness of Valentine Hawkehurst. The shadow of death hovered very near bride and bridegroom: for they knew full well that he who was to preside that day at their simple marriage-feast would soon have tasted that last sacred cup which has no after-flavour of bitterness.

The breakfast promised by the Captain was arranged with much elegance. Hothouse flowers and fruits; wines with the iceden sparkling on the dark glass; chickens and tongue, idealised by the confectioner's art, and scarcely recognisable beneath rich glazings and embellishments of jellies and forcemeats; the airiest and least earthly of lobster-salads; and a pyramid of coffee-ice, testified to the glory of the Belgravian purveyor. It had been pleasant to Captain Paget to send his orders to Gunter, certain of funds to meet the bill. It was almost a glimpse of that land of milk and

honey, that Canaan in Normandy, which he was never to inhabit.

He was very weak, very ill; but the excitement of the occasion in some measure sustained and revivified him. The man who had been engaged to nurse and wait upon him had attired him with much care in a dressing-gown as elegant as the robe in which he had disported himself, a penniless young cornet, in his luxurious garrison quarters, some fifty years before. His loose white locks were crowned with an embroidered smoking-cap; his patrician instep was set off by a dainty scarlet slipper. He had put away the Gospel, and all thoughts of that dread reckoning which he had really some shadowy desire and hope to settle satisfactorily; by some poor dividend which might discharge his obligations to that merciful Creditor who forgives so many just debts. To-day he was of the world, worldly. It was a kind of *ante-mortem* lying-in-state—his last levee; and he was equal to the occasion.

The prettily-adorned table was drawn near the sofa where the invalid host reclined, supported by

numerous pillows. His daughter and her husband, Valentine, Charlotte, and Georgy, made a little circle about him. His own man, and a clerical-looking person from Gunter's, assisted at the airy banquet. Very little was eaten by any of the guests, and it was a relief to everyone when the clerical personage and Captain Paget's factotum retired, after serving tea and coffee with funereal solemnity.

Valentine Hawkehurst was all gentleness and cordiality towards his old taskmaster. The wrong must indeed be dire which is considered in such an hour as this. Valentine remembered only that with this old man he had seen many troubled days; and that for him the end of all earthly wanderings was very near.

The little banquet was not served in Captain Paget's ordinary sitting-room. For this distinguished occasion the landlady had lent a dining-room and drawing-room on the ground-floor, just deserted by a fashionable bachelor lodger who had left town at the close of the season. This drawing-room on the ground-floor, like the room above,

overlooked the Park, and to this apartment the Captain requested his guests to adjourn, with the exception of Mr. Hawkehurst, some little time after the departure of the servants.

"I want to have a few words with Val in private," he said; "I have a secret to communicate. Diana, show Mrs. Hawkehurst the Drive. You can see the Row from my room, but not from these lower windows. There are a good many carriages still, but it is too late for the *crême de la crême*. I remember when the West-end was a desert at this time of year; but I have lived to see the levelling of all distinctions, those of time as well as of class."

Charlotte and Diana retired to the adjoining room with Mrs. Sheldon and M. Lenoble. Valentine was at a loss to imagine what manner of confidential communication his late patron and employer could desire to impart to him. The cautious Horatio waited until the rest of the party were quite out of hearing, talking gaily by the open window, beyond which appeared all the fluttering life and motion of summer leaves, all

the brightness of summer green below and deep-blue sky above. When they seemed to him to be quite engaged with their own conversation, Captain Paget turned to his old companion.

"Val," he said, "we have seen hard times together: we've roughed it among strange places and strange people, you know, and so on; and I think there is a friendly kind of feeling between us?"

He held out his poor wasted hand, and Valentine grasped it firmly in his own with prompt cordiality.

"My dear governor, I have no feeling in my heart that is not friendly to you!"

This was perfectly true.

"And even if I had been inclined to bear any grudge against you on account of the old days, when, you know, you were a little apt to be indifferent as to what scrape you left me in, provided you got off scot-free yourself; if I had been inclined to remember that kind of thing (which, on my honour, I am not), your daughter's noble courage and devotion in the time of

my dear wife's peril should have stood against that old wrong. I cannot tell you how deeply I feel her goodness in that bitter time."

"She is a Paget," murmured the Captain complacently. "*Noblesse oblige.*"

Valentine could scarcely refrain from a smile as he remembered the many occasions upon which the obligations of a noble lineage had weighed very lightly on his aristocratic patron.

"Yes, Val," the Captain resumed in a dreamy tone, "we have seen many strange things together. When I began my travels through this world, in the palmy days of the Regency, I little thought what a weary journey it was to be, and what queer people I was to encounter among my fellow-passengers. However, I've come to the last stage of the long journey now, and I thank Providence that it ends so comfortably."

To this Valentine assented kindly; but he was at a loss to understand why Captain Paget should have required the adjournment of the rest of the party before giving utterance to these mild commonplaces.

For some moments the invalid relapsed into thoughtful silence. Then, rousing himself as if with an effort, he took a few sips of a cooling drink that stood by his side, and began with a startling abruptness.

"You remember your journey to Dorking, Val, last October, when you went to see that mysterious old aunt of yours, eh?"

Valentine blushed as the Captain recalled this cunningly-devised fable.

"Yes," he said gravely; "I remember telling you that I was going to see an aunt at Dorking."

"An aunt who had a little bit of money, eh, Val?" asked the Captain with a grin.

"Yes. I may have gone so far as to speak of a little bit of money."

"And neither the aunt nor the bit of money ever existed, eh, Val? They were mere figments of the brain; and instead of going to Dorking you went to Ullerton, eh, Val? You stole a march upon me there. You wanted to throw your old chum off the scent, eh? You thought

you had got hold of a good thing, and you were afraid your friend and companion might get a share of it."

"Well, you see, my friend and companion had a knack of getting the lion's share. Besides, this good thing was not my own affair. I had to protect the interest of another person—my employer, in point of fact; and it was by his suggestion, and in compliance with his request, that I invented that harmless fiction about Dorking. I don't think there was any dishonourable dealing in the matter. We were soldiers of fortune both; and the stratagem with which I protected myself against you was a very innocent one. You would have employed any stratagem or invented any fiction under the same circumstances. It was a case of diamond cut diamond."

"Precisely; and if the older soldier, if the free lance of many a campaign, got the best of it in the long-run, the younger freebooter could hardly think himself ill-used — could he now, Val?"

"Well, no, I suppose not," replied Valentine,

puzzled by the significance in the face of his old companion. That sly twinkle in the Captain's eyes, that triumphant smile wreathing the Captain's lips, must surely mean mischief.

Valentine Hawkehurst remembered the vague suspicion that had flashed into his mind on that Christmas-eve when Captain Paget and he had dined together at a West-end restaurant, and the Captain had toasted Charlotte Halliday with a smile of sinister meaning. He began to anticipate some startling and unpleasant revelation. He began to understand that in some manner this inscrutable schemer had contrived to overreach him.

"What are you going to tell me?" he asked. "I see there is some lurking mischief in your mind. How was it you were at Ullerton when I was there? I met you on the platform of the station, and I had a vague half suspicion that you followed me up on more than one occasion. I saw a glove in a man's parlour—a glove which I could have sworn to as yours. But when I came back, you were so plausible with your talk

of promoting-business, and so on, that I was fool enough to believe you. And I suppose you cheated and tricked me after all?"

"Cheated and tricked are hard words, my dear Val," said the Captain with delightful blandness; "I had as much right to transact imaginary business in the promoting line at Ullerton as you had to visit a fictitious aunt at Dorking. Self-interest was the governing principle in both cases. I do not think you can have any right to consider yourself injured by me, if I did steal a march upon you, and follow close upon your heels throughout that Ullerton business. I do not think that you can have, on moral grounds, any justification for making a complaint against your old ally."

"Well, I suppose you are right enough in that," said Valentine.

"Shake hands upon it, then. I have not very long to live, and I want to feel myself at peace with mankind. You see, if you had come to me in the first place in a frank and generous spirit, and had said, 'My dear friend, here is a good

thing; let us go into it together, and see what there is to be made out of it;' you would have placed the matter on such a footing that, as a man of honour, I should have been bound to regard your interests as my own. But when you set up a separate interest, when you try to throw dust in my eyes, to hoodwink me—me, Horatio Paget, a man of the world, possessed of some little genius for social diplomacy—you attempt to do that which no man ever yet succeeded in doing, and you immediately release me from those obligations which an honourable man holds sacred. It *was* my glove which you saw in Mr. Goodge's parlour. I had a very satisfactory interview with that reverend person while you were absent from Ullerton on some short excursion, as to the purpose of which I am still in the dark. On certain terms Mr. Goodge agreed to give me the privilege of selecting a stated number from the letters of Mrs. Rebecca Haygarth. I have reason to believe that I made a judicious choice; for the information thus obtained placed me at once upon a track which I

followed industriously until it led me to a triumphant result."

"I do not understand—" began Valentine; but the Captain did not allow him time to say more.

"You do not understand that there could be any other genealogical line than that which you and George Sheldon fitted together so neatly. You have neither of you the experience of life which alone gives wideness of vision. You discovered the connections of the Haygarth and the Meynell families in the past. That was a step in the right direction. The discovery, so far as it went, was a triumph. You allowed the sense of that triumph to intoxicate you. In a business which of all businesses within the range of man's intellect most requires deliberation and sobriety, you went to work in a fever of haste and excitement. Instead of searching out *all* the descendants of Christian Meynell, you pounce upon the first descendant who comes to hand, and elect her, at your own pleasure, sole heiress to the estate of the deceased John Haygarth. You forget that

there may be other descendants of the said Christian Meynell—descendants standing prior to your wife Charlotte in the line of succession."

"I can imagine no such descendants existing," said Valentine with a puzzled manner. "You seem to have made yourself master of our business; but there is one point upon which you are mistaken. George Sheldon and I did not go to work in a fever of haste. We did fully and thoroughly examine the pedigree of that person whom we—and legal advisers of considerable standing—believe to be the sole heir-at-law to the Haygarth estate; and we took good care to convince ourselves that there was no other claimant in existence."

"What do you call convincing yourselves?"

"Christian Meynell had only three children—Samuel, Susan, and Charlotte. The last, Charlotte, married James Halliday, of Newhall and Hyley farms; the other two died unmarried."

"How do you know that? How do you propose to demonstrate that Samuel and Susan Meynell died unmarried?"

"Susan was buried in her maiden name. Mrs. Halliday, her sister, was with her when she died. There was no question of marriage; nor is there the record of any marriage contracted by Samuel."

"All that is no proof."

"Indeed! I should have thought the evidence sufficient. But, in any case, the *onus probandi* is not upon us. Can you prove the marriage of the Samuel Meynell who died at Calais, or of the Susan Meynell who died in London?"

"I can. Susan Meynell's legitimate son is in the next room. It's an unpleasant kind of revelation to make, Val; as he, the son of one sister, stands prior to your wife, the granddaughter of the other sister, in the order of succession. AND HE TAKES ALL!"

"He takes all!" repeated Valentine, bewildered. "He! Susan Meynell's son? In the next room? What does all this mean?"

"It means that when Susan was deserted by the scoundrel who took her away from her home, she found an honest fellow to marry her. The name of her husband was Lenoble. Gustave

Lenoble yonder, my daughter's husband, is her only child by that marriage. A perfectly legal marriage, my dear Val—everything *en règle*, I assure you. The business is in the hands of Messrs. Dashwood and Vernon of Whitehall—a first-class firm; counsel's opinion most decided as to Lenoble's position. They have been rather slow about the preliminary steps, and, *entre nous*, I have not cared to hurry them, for I wanted to get my daughter's marriage over quietly before we began our proceedings in Chancery. It comes rather hard upon you, Val, I allow; but, you see, if you had acted generously, not to say honourably, towards me in the first instance, you'd have had the advantage of my experience. As it is, you have been working in the dark. However, things are not so bad as they might be. You might have married some ugly old harridan for the sake of this Haygarth estate; you have secured a pretty and amiable wife, and you mustn't be downhearted if you find yourself, from a financial point of view, most outrageously sold."

The Captain could not refrain from a laugh

as he contemplated his young friend's surprise. The laugh degenerated into a fit of coughing, and it was some little time before the enfeebled Horatio was ready to resume the interrupted conversation. In this pause Valentine had leisure to face this new position. There was for the moment a sharp sense of disappointment. It is not possible for humanity to be quite indifferent to a hundred thousand pounds. So much of the "light and sweetness" of life is attainable for that sum; such pleasures, of the purest and noblest, are in the power of the possessor. But in this moment Valentine fully realised the fact that he had never taken the idea of this fortune into his mind—never made it part and parcel of himself, to be plucked out of his heart with anguish, and to leave a bleeding wound in the place where it had grown. It seemed to him as if he had been wakened abruptly from some bright bewildering dream; but the sharp pang of mercenary desires disappointed, of sordid hopes suddenly reft, was not for him.

Beyond this sense of uncertainty which had

made the Haygarthian fortune seem at best such "stuff as dreams are made of," there had been ever present in his mind of late the dismal association connected with this money. For this, and to get power over this through the rights of his weak wife, had Philip Sheldon plotted against the life of that sweet girl who was but newly rescued from the jaws of the grave. The bitter memory of those days and nights of suspense could never have been quite dissociated from the money that had been the primary cause of all this slow torture.

"Do you think I shall love my wife any less because she has no claim to this Haygarth estate?" he exclaimed presently, looking with half-contemptuous indignation upon the broken-down schemer. "I loved her long before I knew the name of Haygarth: I should have loved her if I had found her a beggar in the London streets, a peasant girl weeding for sixpence a day in some dismal swamp of agricultural poverty and ignorance. I am not going to say that this money would not have brought us pleasure; pictures and gardens and

bright rooms, and books without number, and intercourse with congenial acquaintance, and delightful journeyings to all the fairest places upon this earth, and the power to do some good in our generation, and a sense of security for our future, and by and by, perhaps, for the future of dear children, for whose prosperity we should be more anxious than for our own. Pleasure the money would most probably have brought for us in abundance; but I doubt if it could buy us more perfect happiness than we may know in the simplest home that my toil can support. Ah, Captain, I question if you ever knew the sweetest sensation life can give—the delight of working for those we love."

Captain Paget stared at his sometime protégé in a kind of rapture of wonder, not entirely unmingled with admiration.

"Egad!" he exclaimed, "I have read of this kind of thing in novels; but in the whole course of my experience I never met with anything equal to it. My son-in-law, Lenoble yonder, is a generous foo—fellow enough; but then, since infancy,

he has never known the want of money. And generosity from that kind of man is no more of a virtue than the foolhardiness of a child who pokes his fingers into the candle, not knowing the properties of the thing he has to deal with. But anything like generosity from you, from a man reared as you were reared, is, I freely confess, a little beyond my comprehension."

"Yes; it is a transformation, is it not? But I don't think I was ever inordinately fond of money. Your genuine Bohemian rarely is. He is too well schooled in the art of living without cash, and he asks so little here below. His pipe, his friend, his dog, his books, his garret, his billiards, his beer. It is all a question of a few pounds a week. And if, some day, the divine enchanter Love takes the poor fellow under his guidance, and teaches him to do without billiards and beer, your Bohemian settles down into the purest and best of men. Think what Goldy might have been if some good woman had taken compassion upon him and married him, and henpecked him ever afterwards. He might have

written as many novels as Sir Walter Scott, and died master of some Hibernian Abbotsford, some fair domain among the bright green hills that look down upon broad Shannon's silvery falls. No, Captain; your intelligence has not annihilated me. I can face the future boldly with my dear young wife upon my arm."

"Upon my soul, Val, you are a very noble fellow!" exclaimed Horatio Paget, with real enthusiasm; "and I am sorry I have kept you in the dark so long."

"You have kept me in the dark? Yes; to be sure. How long have you known this—about Susan Meynell?"

"Well, my dear boy, not very long."

"But how long? A month—two months? Yes; you have known Lenoble's position ever since you knew him; and Charlotte told me three months ago of Diana's engagement to Lenoble. Do you know that if Sheldon had succeeded, Charlotte's blood would have been upon your head? If you had not concealed the truth, his villany would never have been attempted."

"But, my dear Val," exclaimed the Captain piteously, "I was not to know—"

"No; you were not to know that there could be such a wretch as Philip Sheldon upon this earth. We will say no more of that. I kept my secret, you kept yours. Mischief unspeakable well-nigh came of all this underhand work. But Heaven has been merciful to us. We have passed through the valley of the shadow of death; and if anything could make my wife dearer to me than she was when first I won her promise to be mine, it would be the sorrow of the last few months. And now I will go and shake hands with Lenoble, my wife's kinsman. He is a fine fellow, and well deserves his good fortune. Stay; one word. Did Diana know this? did she know that her lover is heir to the Haygarth estate?"

"She does not know it now. She has never heard the name of Haygarth. And between you and me, Val, it cost me a world of trouble to persuade her to say yes to Lenoble's offer, though he is a very decent match for her, even without reference to the Haygarth estate."

"I am glad she knew nothing of this," said Valentine; "I am very glad."

After this he again shook hands with Captain Paget, at that gentleman's request, and the Captain expressed himself much relieved by the conversation, and by his late protégé's very generous behaviour. He called to his daughter and the rest presently, and they came at his summons.

"Is your long talk finished, papa?" asked Diana.

"And is the secret told?" demanded Charlotte of her obedient husband and slave.

"Yes, dear, it is told," he answered gravely.

"I hope it is a pleasant secret."

"I do not think the knowledge of it will give you much pain, dearest. You have learnt to think yourself a — a kind of an heiress of late, have you not?"

"Papa — Mr. Sheldon — told me that I had a claim to some money; but I have not thought much about it, except that I should give you Grote and Macaulay in dark-brown calf, with bevelled boards and red edges, like that edition

you saw at the auctioneer's in Bond-street, and have talked about ever since; and a horse, perhaps; and a glass porch to our cottage."

"Well, darling, the books in dark-brown calf, and the horse, and the glass porch, may all be ours in the future; but the money was only a dream—it has melted away, dear."

"Is that all?" asked Charlotte. "Why, I daresay the day will come when you will be as rich as Sir Walter Scott."

"In the mean time I have something to give you instead of the money."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; a cousin. Will that do as well, my love?"

"A cousin? I shall like her very much if she is nice."

"The cousin I mean is a gentleman."

"But where is he to come from?" cried Charlotte, laughing. "Has he dropped from the moon? The only relations I have in the world are Uncle and Aunt Mercer. How can you pretend to find me a cousin?"

"Do you remember telling me of your grandmother's only sister—Susan Meynell?"

"Yes," said Charlotte with a sudden blush; "I remember."

"That Miss Meynell married a gentleman of Normandy, and left one only child, a son. His name is Gustave Lenoble, and he is standing by your side. He is heir-at-law to a very large fortune, which it was once supposed you could claim. Are you sorry, Lotta, to find a kinsman and lose a fortune?—and are you contented to begin the world with no hope except in your husband's patience and courage?"

"And genius!" cried Charlotte with enthusiasm.

The sweet blinding glamour of love shone upon this young scribbler, and she believed that he was indeed worthy to take rank among the greatest of that grand brotherhood of which he was so humble a member. She looked up at him with the prettiest confidence; her clinging hand clasped his with love and trust immeasurable. He felt and knew that love like this

was a treasure beside which the Reverend John Haygarth's hoarded thousands must needs seem but sorry dross.

After this there was much explanation and congratulation. Gustave Lenoble was delighted to claim so fair a kinswoman.

"Thou art like my eldest, my cousin," he said; "Diane saw the likeness at the Sacré Cœur when she beheld my daughter; and I too saw my eldest's look in thine eyes when I first met thee. Remember, it was convened between us that Côtenoir should be a home for thee and for Hawkehurst before I knew what link bound thee to the house of Lenoble. Now thou and thy husband will be of our family."

Diana was bewildered, grieved, indignant with the father who had deceived her by his studious suppression of the truth. She found herself placed in the position of rival to Charlotte, and the whole proceeding seemed to her mean and treacherous.

But it was no time for remonstrance or open expression of indignant feeling. Her father's

days were numbered. She knew this, and she held her peace. Nor did Mrs. Sheldon utter any word of complaint, though the disappointment she experienced upon hearing this revelation was very keen. The idea of the four or five thousand pounds which were to come to Charlotte had been a consolation to her in the midst of that confusion and desolation which had newly come upon her life. She left Knightsbridge that evening somewhat depressed in spirits, and half inclined to be angry with Charlotte and her husband for their gaiety of manner and evident happiness in each other's society.

"It seems hard to have to begin the world at my age," she murmured hopelessly, "after being accustomed to have everything nice about me, as I had at the Lawn; though I own that the trouble and care of the servants was wearing me to the grave."

"Dear mamma," exclaimed Charlotte tenderly, "there is no fear of trouble or poverty for you or for us. Valentine has plenty of money, and is on the high-road to securing a

comfortable income. Authors do not starve in garrets now, you know, as they used to do, poor things, when Doctor Johnson ate his dinner in a cave, or something dreadful of that kind; and when Sir Richard Steele thought it quite a wonderful thing to get a pound of tea for his wife. And Valentine's heart is in his profession, and he will work for us."

"As long as I have a hand that can write and a brain that can guide my pen," interposed Mr. Hawkehurst gaily. "I have given hostages to Fortune. I can face the hazard boldly. I feel as confident and as happy as if we lived in the golden age, when there was neither care nor toil for innocent mankind, and all the brightest things of earth were the spontaneous gift of the gods."

CHAPTER V.

BOHEMIAN INDEPENDENCE.

MONSIEUR and Madame Lenoble went to Brighton for their honeymoon. A letter or a telegraphic message would bring them thence swiftly to the bedside of the dying Captain, should the last fatal change set in suddenly. Diana had wished to stay with her father, but Horatio insisted upon the honeymoon trip, and that everything should be done in a correct and gentlemanly manner.

"You can engage rooms at the Albion," Captain Paget had said to his son-in-law a few days before the quiet wedding. "The house is extremely comfortable; and you will be received by a compatriot. The proprietor is a Frenchman, and a very gentlemanly person, I assure you; the *cuisine* irreproachable. I remember the old

Steyne, when Mrs. Fitz-Herbert lived close by, and received all the best people; in the days when the Cockney had not yet taken possession of Brighthelmstone; and the Chinese dragons and pagodas were bright and fresh in the Pavilion."

To Brighton therefore the bride and bridegroom departed; Diana attended by a maid, an appanage which the Captain had insisted upon. Poor Diana was sorely puzzled as to what she should find for the maid to do when her hair had been dressed early in the morning, and her costume laid out in state for the day.

"I think I must buy some handkerchiefs for her to hem," she said to Gustave; "it will be quite dreadful for her to have nothing to do all day long."

The weather was warm and bright. The sea danced and sparkled under the windows. Gustave was always in the same happy frame of mind. An elegant landau had been secured for the period of their visit; and a pair of capital horses carried them out on long and pleasant

expeditions to the pretty Sussex villages or across the broad bare downs, beyond which the sea stretched blue and bright.

In the evening, when the lamp was lighted and the urn hissed gaily, Diana felt that she and her husband were at home. It was the first home she had known—the first time she had been sole mistress and centre of a household. She looked back at all the old desolation, the dreary shifting from lodging to lodging, the degradation, the self-abasement, the dull apathy of despair; and then she looked across at her husband as he lounged in his easy-chair, contemplating her with dreamy adoring eyes, in a kind of lazy worship; and she knew that for this man she was the centre of the universe, the very key-stone in the arch of life.

She stretched out her hand to him with a smile, and he pressed it fondly to his lips. There were twinkling jewels upon the slender fingers; for the prettiest shop in Brighton—the brightest shop in Brighton—had been ransacked that morning by the fond, frivolous,

happy husband, as pleased to bedeck his wife as a child to dress her last new doll.

"How can I ever be worthy of so much affection, Gustave!" she exclaimed, as he kissed the twinkling fingers.

And it did indeed seem to her that for this free gift of love she could never render a sufficient recompense.

"Thou wilt make Côtenoir a home," he said; "thou knowest not how I have sighed for a home. This room, with the lamplight shining on thy face, and thy white hands moving about the tea-cups, and thy sweet smile, which greets me every now and then when thou lookest by here,—it is more of home than I have ever known since I left Beaubocage, that modest dwelling where lived those two angels of kindness, my aunt and my grandmother."

In one of those long pleasant drives to a distant village nestling under the lee of a steep hill, the husband and wife had much serious talk about the position of the former with reference to the Haygarth estate. The result of that conversation

was shown in a letter which Charlotte Hawkehurst received the next day from her friend Diana Lenoble.

"Albion Hotel, Brighton.

"EVER-DEAR LOTTA,—Gustave and I have discussed the Haygarth business with great satisfaction to ourselves, since it transpired in the course of our conversation that we are both of one mind in the matter. It is agreed between us that as he is very well off already, and as he never hoped or expected to inherit a fortune from his maternal ancestor, it is only just that he should divide this unlooked-for wealth with his dear cousin, whose claim to that inheritance he recognises as equal to his own; the mere fact of seniority making only a legal and not a moral difference in the degree of relationship to the Reverend John Haygarth. Do you understand, darling?—*you* are to have half this money. My husband will not step in between you and good fortune. I cannot tell you how happy this determination of Gustave's has made me. I felt my-

self in a manner base and ungrateful when I thought I was to share wealth that might have been yours: but I ought to have better understood the justice of my husband's mind. And now, dearest, all will be arranged very simply: Gustave will come to London and see his lawyers, and execute some kind of deed, and the whole affair will be settled.

"We have had some charming drives," &c. &c.

Here the young wife branched off into a description of the simple pleasures of their honeymoon holiday.

This letter was answered by Valentine Hawkehurst in person. He came down to Brighton to thank his friends for their generous desire to enrich his wife, and to decline, on her part, any share in John Haygarth's wealth.

It was in vain that Gustave and Diana argued the point, Mr. Hawkehurst was fixed as fate.

"Believe me, it is better as it is," he said. "Charlotte and I have arrived at this conviction with all due thought and deliberation. We are

both young, and the world is all before us. There is much in the past that I have to redeem, as Diana well knows. It is better that I should fight the battle of life unaided, and rise from the ranks by right of my merit as a soldier. If ever we have need of help—if ever I find myself breaking down—you may be sure that it is to you I shall come. By and by, if Providence gives me children to work for, I will refuse no bounty that you may bestow on them. Their future may be rendered secure by your generosity, if you please, Lenoble; they will be your kindred. But for an alien like myself there is no discipline so wholesome as honest hard work. I am as rich as John Milton when he set up a school in St. Bride's Churchyard."

To this resolution Mr. Hawkehurst adhered with a gentle firmness.

"Thou art chivalrous like Don Quixote," said Gustave Lenoble; "but it shall be as thou wouldest. Touch there."

He offered his hand, which the other grasped with all heartiness.

"I will be godfather to thy little first-one, and I will settle on him ten thousand pounds before he cuts his first tooth," said Gustave decisively.

CHAPTER VI.

BEYOND THE VEIL.

DIANA and her husband did not linger long at Brighton; they went back to town in time to see the last of that old wayfarer whose troubled journey came to so peaceful an ending. It was a very calm haven in which this battered old privateer lay at anchor after life's tempestuous course; but to the Captain himself it seemed a hard thing that he should not have been permitted one brief cruise upon that summer sea which danced so gaily beneath the keel of the Lenobles' prosperous bark.

"We have shared adversity, my love," he said sadly, when he talked with his daughter in the last few days; "but your prosperity I am to have no share in. Well, I suppose I have no right to complain. My life has been an erring

one; but poverty is the most vicious companion that a man can consort with. If I had come into six or seven thousand a-year, I might have been as starch in my notions as a bishop; but I have been obliged to live, Diana—that was the primary necessity, and I learnt to accommodate myself to it."

That he had erred, the Captain was very ready to acknowledge. That he had sinned deeply, and had much need to repent himself of his iniquity, he was very slow to perceive. But sometimes, in the still watches of the night, when the faint lamplight on the shadowy wall was more gloomy than darkness, when the nurse, hired to assist his own man in these last days, dozed in her comfortable chair, the truth came home to his shallow soul, and Horatio Paget knew that he had been indeed a sinner, and very vile among sinners. Then, for a moment, the veil of self-deception was lifted, and he saw his past life as it had really been,—selfish, dishonourable, cruel beyond measure in reckless injury of others. For a moment the awful book was

opened, and the sinner saw the fearful sum set against his name.

"What can wipe out the dread account?" he asked himself. "Is there such a thing as forgiveness for a selfish useless life—a life which is one long offence against God and man?"

In these long wakeful nights the dying man thought much of his wife. The sweet tender face came back to him, with its mournful wondering look. He knew, now, how his falsehoods and dishonours had wounded and oppressed that gentle soul. He remembered how often she had pleaded for the right, and how he had ridiculed her arguments, and set at naught her tender pleadings. He had fancied her in a manner inimical to himself when she urged the cause of some angry creditor or meek deluded landlady. Now, with the light that is not upon earth or sea shining on the picture of his past career, he could see and understand things as he had never seen or understood them before. He knew now that it was for his own sake that faithful and devoted wife had pleaded, his own interest that

had been near to her pitying heart, as well as the interest of bakers and butchers, landladies and tailors.

"She might have made a good man of me, if I had let her have her way," he thought to himself. "I know that *she* is in heaven. Will she plead for me, I wonder, at the foot of the Great Throne? I used to laugh at her bad English, or fly in a passion with her sometimes, poor soul, when I wanted her to pass for a lady, and she broke down outrageously. But *there* her voice will be heard when mine appeals in vain. Dear soul! I wonder who taught her to be so pure and unselfish, and trusting and faithful? She was a Christian without knowing it. 'I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.'"

He thought of his wife's lonely deathbed, and compared it with his own. For him there was luxury; by him watched a devoted and all-forgiving daughter, a generous friend and son-in-law. All that could be done to soothe the pain-

ful descent was done for him. For her there had been nothing but loneliness and sorrow.

"But she might be certain of a speedy welcome in a better home," thought Horatio; "and I—? Ah, dear kind creature, *there* the difference was all in her favour."

As the closing scene grew nearer, he thought more and more of his gentle low-born wife, whose hold upon him in life had been so slender, whose memory had occupied until now so insignificant a place in his mind. His daughter watched with him unceasingly in the last two days and nights. His mind wandered. On the day of his death he mistook Diana for that long-lost companion.

"I have not been a kind husband, Mary, my dear," he faltered; "but the world has been hard upon me—debts—difficulties—crack regiment—expensive mess—set of gamblers—no pity on a young man without fortune—force of example—tied a millstone round my wretched neck before I was twenty-one years of age."

Later, when the doctor had felt his pulse for the last time, he cried out suddenly, "I have

made a statement of my affairs. The liabilities are numerous—the assets *nil*; but I rely on the clemency of this Court."

These were his last words. He sank into a kind of stupor betwixt sleeping and waking, and in this he died.

CHAPTER VII.

BETTER THAN GOLD.

THE little fleet of paper boats which Mr. Sheldon had pioneered so skilfully over the commercial seas came to grief very soon after the disappearance of the admiral. A bill drawn upon the Honduras Mahogany Company, Limited, was the first to reach maturity. The bill was referred to the drawer—the drawer was not to be found.

"I have not seen Sheldon for the last fortnight," Mr. Orcott informed the gentleman who brought him the document.

"Out of business for a fortnight?"

"He has not been in business for a month. His stepdaughter has been very ill—at death's door, and all that kind of thing, and my governor was awfully cut up about it. There used to be a couple of doctors at the house every day, and no

end of fuss. I took Sheldon his letters, and managed matters for him here, and so on. And one fine morning my young lady runs off and gets married on the quiet: so I suspect there was a good deal of shamming about the illness—and those old fogies, the doctors, winked at it. Between them all, I fancy Sheldon was completely sold; and he has turned savage and gone off somewhere in the sulks."

"I wish he had chosen any other time for his sulks," said the holder of the bill; "my partner and I have discounted several acceptances for him. He gave us liberal terms, and we considered any paper of his as safe as a Bank-of-England note; and now this confounded bill comes back to us through our bankers, noted, 'Refer to drawer'—a most unpleasant thing, you know; and very inconsiderate of Sheldon to leave us in such a fix."

"He has forgotten the bill, I suppose," said Mr. Orcott.

"Well, but you see, really now, a business man ought not to forget that kind of thing. And

so Miss Halliday has made a runaway match, has she? I remember seeing her when I dined at Bayswater—an uncommonly fine girl. And she has gone and thrown herself away upon some penniless scapegrace, most likely? Now, by the bye, how about this Honduras Company, Mr. Orcott; they don't seem to have any London offices?"

"I believe not. We've some of their prospectuses somewhere about, I think. Would you like to see one?"

"I should, very much."

Mr. Orcott opened two or three drawers, and after some little trouble produced the required document.

It was a very flourishing prospectus, setting forth the enormous benefits to be derived by shareholders from the profitable dealings of the company. Some good high-sounding names figured in the list of directors, and the chairman was Captain H. N. Cromie Paget. The prospectus looked well enough, but the holder of Mr. Sheldon's dishonoured bill was not able to

derive much comfort from high-sounding phrases and high-sounding names.

"I'll go down to Bayswater and see if I can hear anything of your governor," he said to Mr. Orcott.

"He was not there yesterday when I called, and his servants could tell me nothing of his whereabouts," the young Yorkshireman said very coolly.

"Indeed!" cried the holder of the dishonoured bill in some alarm. "Now really that is not right; a business man ought not to do that kind of thing."

He called a cab and drove to the Lawn. There was the smart Gothic villa, with its pointed gables, and florid chimneys, and oriel windows, and in the Tudor casements of the ground-floor appeared the bills of a West-end auctioneer, announcing in large letters that the lease of this charming mansion, together with the nearly-new furniture, linen, books, china, plate, carefully selected proof-prints after distinguished modern artists, small cellar of choice wines, &c. &c. &c.

would be disposed of by auction on the following day.

Mr. Sheldon's victim went into the house, where he found some men preparing for the forthcoming sale.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he asked, aghast.

"A bill of sale, sir. Messrs. Napthali and Zabulon."

This was enough. The holder of the bill went back to the City. Another bill came due on the following day, and before the members of the Stock Exchange took their luncheon, it was known that Philip Sheldon's credit was among the things of the past.

"I always thought he was out of his depth," said one set of talkers.

"He was the last man I should have expected to see come to grief," said another set of talkers.

On settling-day came the awful proclamation —Philip Sheldon had absconded and would not meet his differences.

On the same day came a terrible revelation

to Mr. George Sheldon of Gray's-Inn, solicitor, genealogist and pedigree-hunter. The first official step in the advancement of Gustave Lenoble's claim against the Crown was taken by Messrs. Dashwood and Vernon, the solicitors of Whitehall; and George Sheldon discovered that between Charlotte Hawkehurst and the Haygarth estate there stood a prior claimant, whereby all his toil, trouble, costs out of pocket, and wear and tear of body and mind, had been wasted.

"It is enough to make a man go and cut his throat," cried George, in his first savage sense of utter disappointment.

He went into his slovenly bedroom, and took out one of his razors, and felt the corrugated surface of the left side of his neck meditatively. But the razor was blunt, and the corrugated surface seemed very tough and unmanageable; so George Sheldon decided that this kind of operation was an affair which might be deferred.

He heard the next day that his brother was *non est*, and, in his own phraseology, that there was a pretty kettle-of-fish in the City.

"Upon my word, Phil and I seem to have brought our pigs to a very nice market," he said. "I daresay, wherever that fellow has gone, he has carried a well-lined purse with him. But I wouldn't have his conscience for all the wealth of the Rothschilds. It's bad enough to see Tom Halliday's face as *I* see it sometimes. What must it be to *him?*"

A little more than a year after this, and the yellow corn was waving on the fertile plains of Normandy, fruit ripening in orchards on hill-side and in valley; merry holiday-folks splashing and dabbling in the waves that wash the yellow sands of Dieppe; horses coming to grief in Norman steeplechases; desperate gamesters losing their francs and half-francs in all kinds of frivolous games in the Dieppe *établissement;* and yonder, in the heart of fair Normandy, beyond the tall steeples of Rouen, a happy family assembled at the Château Côtenoir.

One happy family—two happy families rather, but so closely united by the bonds of love and friendship as to seem indeed one. Here are Gus-

tave Lenoble and his young wife Diana, with two tall slender damsels by their side; and here is Valentine Hawkehurst, the successful young scribbler, with his fair young wife Charlotte; and out on the terrace yonder are two nurses walking with two babies, at that early and to some minds obnoxious stage of babyhood in which a perpetual rocking, and pacing to and fro, and swaying backwards and forwards in the air, is necessary for the preservation of anything approaching tranquillity. But to the minds of the two young mothers and the two proud fathers, these small creatures in their long white robes seem something too bright for earth. The united ages of the babies do not amount to six months; but the mothers have counted every gradual stage of these young lives, and to both it seems as if there had been no time in which the children were not, with so firm a hold have they possessed themselves of every thought in the foolish maternal mind, of every impulse in the weak maternal heart.

Mrs. Hawkehurst has brought her son to see his aunt Diana: for Diana has insisted upon as-

suming that relationship by letters-patent, as it were. Madame Lenoble's baby is a daughter, and this fact in itself seems to the two friends to be a special interposition of Providence.

"Would it not be delightful if they should grow up to love each other and marry?" exclaimed Diana; and Charlotte agreed with her that such an event in the future did indeed seem in a manner foreshadowed by the conduct of the infants in the present.

"He takes notice of her already!" she exclaimed, looking out at the little creature in white-muslin robes, held up against the warm blue sky; "see, they are cooing at each other! I am sure that must be cooing."

And then the two mothers went out upon the sunny terrace-walk and fondly contemplated these domestic treasures, until the domestic treasures were seized with some of the inexplicable throes and mysterious agonies of early babyhood, and had to be borne off shrieking to their nurseries.

"Dear angel," said Gustave of his "little last one," "she has the very shriek of Clarice here, poignant and penetrating, until to drown the heart. Dost thou figure to thyself that thy voice was penetrating as that, my beautiful, in the time?"

He kissed his beautiful, and she ran off to join the procession following the two babies,—alarmed nurses, distracted mammas, shrieking infants, anxious damsels.

"*C'est un vrai tourbillon*," as Gustave remarked to his companion Valentine Hawkehurst; "these women, how they love their children! What of saints, what of Madonnas, what of angels!"

Whereupon he spouted Victor Hugo:

"Lorsque l'enfant paraît, le cercle de famille
Applaudit à grands cris; son doux regard qui brille
Fait briller tous les yeux;
Et les plus tristes fronts, les plus souillés peut-être,
Se dérident soudain à voir l'enfant paraître,
Innocent et joyeux."

All things had gone well for M. Lenoble. His direct descent from Matthew Haygarth, the father of the intestate, had been proved to the

satisfaction of Crown lawyers and High Court of Chancery, and he had been in due course placed in possession of the reverend intestate's estate, to the profit and pleasure of his solicitors and M. Fleurus, and to the unspeakable aggravation of George Sheldon, who washed his hands at once and for ever of all genealogical research, and fell back in an imbittered and angry spirit upon the smaller profits to be derived from petty transactions in the bill-discounting line, and a championship of penniless sufferers of all classes, from a damsel who considered herself jilted by a fickle swain, in proof of whose inconstancy she could produce documentary evidence of the "pork-chop and tomato-sauce" order, to a pedestrian who knocked his head against a projecting shutter in the Strand, and straightway walked home to Holloway to lay himself up for a twelvemonth in a state of mental and bodily incapacity requiring large pecuniary redress from the owner of the fatal shutter. To this noble protection of the rights of the weak did George Sheldon devote his intellect; and when malicious enemies

stigmatised these Quixotic endeavours as "speculative actions," or when, in the breaking-down of some oppressed damsel's cause by reason of the slender evidence afforded by some reticent lover's epistolary effusions, unjust judges told him that he "ought to be ashamed of himself" for bringing such an action, the generous attorney no doubt took consolation from an approving conscience, and went forth from that court, to look for other oppressed damsels or injured wayfarers, erect and unshaken.

Some little profit Mr. Sheldon of Gray's-Inn did derive from the Haygarth estate: for at the request of Gustave Lenoble, Messrs. Dashwood and Vernon sent him a cheque for one thousand pounds as the price of those early investigations which had set the artful Captain upon the right track. He wrote a ceremoniously grateful letter to Gustave Lenoble on receiving this honorarium. It is always well to be grateful for benefits received from a rich man; but in the depths of his heart he execrated the fortunate inheritor of the Haygarthian thousands.

Mr. Hawkehurst was not quite so vehement in the expression of his feelings as that lively Celt, Gustave; but deep in his heart there was a sense of happiness no less pure and exalted.

Providence had given him more than he had ever dared to hope—not John Haygarth's thousands; not a life of luxurious idleness, and dinner-giving, and Derby-days, and boxes on the grand tier, and carriage-horses at five hundred guineas a pair; not a palace in Belgravia, and a shooting-box in the Highlands, and a villa at Cowes; not these things, in which he would once have perceived the *summum bonum;* but a fair price for his labour, a dear young wife, a tranquil home.

Nor had his researches among the dusty records of departed Haygarths been profitless, in a pecuniary sense, to himself. Gustave Lenoble insisted that he should accept that honorarium of three thousand pounds which had been promised by George Sheldon as the reward of his success.

"Captain Paget would never have been put on the right track if he had not filched your secrets from you," said the son and heir of Susan

Meynell. "It is to your researches, in the first place, that I owe this inheritance, and you cannot refuse to accept the agreed price of your labour."

Valentine did not refuse this fairly-earned reward, nor did he oppose the settlement which Gustave made in favour of Charlotte's infant son. It seemed to him only just that some share of the heritage should fall to the descendant of poor Susan's younger sister, and faithful friend.

With this capital of three thousand pounds comfortably invested in consols, and with the interest of that sum of ten thousand pounds settled on his infant son, Mr. Hawkehurst began the world, in his new character of a husband and a father, very pleasantly.

Of his literary career very little need be said here. He was yet at the beginning of the long dusty road that leads to the temple of Fame. It is enough to state that he found the dusty high-road rather difficult walking, and that he was pelted with more mud, flung by nameless assailants hidden behind the hedges, than he had

anticipated when he set out upon the first stage of his journey. Happily, he found pleasant fellow-travellers, and kindly encouragement from an indulgent public, and was thus able to accept the mud which bespattered his garments in a very placid spirit, and to make light of all obstacles in the great highway.

The cottage at Wimbledon was no longer a dream. It was a pleasant reality, the pride and delight of Mrs. Sheldon and Ann Woolper. It was a picturesque dwelling-place, half cottage, half villa, situated on the broad high-road from London to Kingston, with all the woodland of Richmond Park to be seen from the windows at the back. Only a wall divided Mr. Hawkehurst's gardens from the coverts of the Queen. It was like a royal demesne, Charlotte said; whereupon her husband insisted that it should be christened by the name of a royal dwelling, and so called it Charlottenburg.

Mr. Hawkehurst had secured this delightful abode for a considerable term of years, and upon the furnishing and decoration of the pretty rustic

rooms Charlotte and he lavished unmeasured care. The delicious excitement of "picking up," or, in more elegant parlance, "collecting," was to these two happy people an inexhaustible source of pleasure. Every eccentric little table, every luxurious chair, had its special history, and had been the subject of negotiation and diplomacy that might have sufficed a Burleigh in the reorganisation of Western Europe. The little Dresden and Vienna cups and saucers in the maple cabinet had been every one bought from a different dealer. The figures on the mantelpiece were Old Chelsea, of a quality that would have excited the envy of a Bernal or a Bohn, and had only fallen to the proud possessors by a sequence of fortuitous circumstances, the history of which was almost as thrilling as the story of Boehmer's diamond-necklace. The curtains in the drawing-room had draped the *portières* of the lovely Lady Blessington, and had been bought for a song by Valentine Hawkehurst, after passing through the hands of brokers and dealers innumerable. The tapestry-covered Louis-Quatorze chairs had belonged to Madame de Sé-

vigné, and had furnished that dull country-house whence she wrote the liveliest letters extant to her disreputable cousin, Bussy, Count of Rabutin. These inestimable treasures had been picked up by Mr. and Mrs. Hawkehurst from a bric-à-brac merchant in a little court at the back of the Rue Vivienne, whither the young couple had gone arm-in-arm to choose a bonnet on their first pleasure-trip to Paris. The clock in the modest dining-room had been secured from the repository of the same merchant, and was warranted to have sounded the last domestic hours of Maximilian Robespierre in his humble lodging *chez le Menuisier*. The inkstand into which Mr. Hawkehurst dipped his rapid pen had served the literary career of Voltaire; the blotting-book on which he wrote had been used by Balzac.

To the plausible fictions of the second-hand dealer Mr. and Mrs. Hawkehurst lent willing ears, and it seemed to them as if these associations, for which they had paid somewhat dearly, imparted a new grace to their home.

The arrangement and superintendence of all

these treasures gave poor Georgy endless pleasure and employment; but, in her heart of hearts, she believed in the prim splendours of the dismantled Lawn, as much superior to these second-hand objects of art and upholstery. Nor did Ann Woolper regard the Chelsea figures and Dresden teacups, and old black Albert-Dürer engravings, as anything better than an innocent eccentricity on the part of the master of the house, for the saving of whose purse she managed and economised as faithfully as she had done for that lost master whereof the memory was so bitter.

It will be seen, therefore, that Mr. Hawkehurst with a wife, a mother-in-law, and a faithful old servant, was likely to be well taken care of; a little spoiled perhaps by "much cherishing," but carefully guarded from all those temptations which are supposed to assail the bachelor man-of-letters, toiling alone and neglected in Temple chambers. For him the days passed in a pleasant monotony of constant labour, lightened always by the thought of those for whom he worked, cheered ever by the fond hope of future fame. He was no longer a

book-maker. He had written a book, the proceeds of which had enabled him to furnish the Wimbledon villa; and he was engaged in writing a second book, the fruits whereof would secure the needs of the immediate future. He had insured his life for a considerable amount, and had shown himself in all things prudent to a degree that verged upon Philistinism. But the policies taken out on Charlotte's life by Mr. Sheldon had been suffered to lapse. Valentine would have no money staked on that dear head.

The steed which Charlotte had desired for her husband's pleasure, the library which she had catalogued so often, were yet among the delights of the future; but life has lost half its brightness when there is no unfulfilled desire left to the dreamer; and the horse which Mr. Hawkehurst was to ride in time to come, and the noble library which he was to collect, were the pleasant themes of Charlotte's conversation very often, as she and her husband walked on the heights of Wimbledon in the twilight, when his day's work was done.

These twilight walks were the happy holidays

of his life, and a part of his liberal education. He told his wife everything, every literary scheme, every fancy, every shadowy outline of future work, every new discovery in the boundless realms of Bookland. His enthusiasm; his hero-worship; his setting-up of one favourite and knocking-down of another: his unchristian pleasure in that awful slating of poor Jones in this week's *Saturday*, or the flaying alive of Robinson in the *Bond-street Backbiter*;—in a word, his "shop" never became wearisome to Charlotte. She listened always with a like rapture and sympathy; she worshipped his favourites of Bookland; she welcomed his friends and fellow-workers with unvarying sweetness; she devised and superintended the fitting-up of a smoking-room that was perfectly paradisaical, a glimpse of the Alhambra in miniature; and that obnoxious dish, the cold shoulder, was never served in Mr. Hawkehurst's dwelling. So sweet a wife, so pleasant a home, popularised the institution of matrimony among the young writer's bachelor friends; and that much-abused and cruelly-maligned member of the human race, the mother-

in-law, was almost rehabilitated by Mrs. Sheldon's easy good-nature and evident regard for the interests of her daughter's husband.

And after all the groping among dryasdust records of a bygone century, after all the patient following of those faint traces on the sands of time left by the feet of Matthew Haygarth, *this* was Charlotte's Inheritance,—a heart whose innocence and affection made home a kind of earthly paradise, and gave to life's commonest things a charm that all the gold ever found in California could not have imparted to them. This was Charlotte's Inheritance,—the tender, unselfish nature of the Haygarths and the Hallidays; and thus dowered, her husband would not have exchanged her for the wealthiest heiress whose marriage was ever chronicled in *Court Circular* or *Court Journal.*

CHAPTER VIII.

LOST SIGHT OF.

A YEAR and a half had passed since the disappearance of Philip Sheldon from the circle in which he had been considered a person of some importance. The repudiation of those bills by which he had sustained his exhausted credit, or rather the discovery that the companies upon which the bills pretended to be drawn were of all shadows the most shadowy, had brought consternation upon many, and ruin upon some. Bitter and unmeasured were the terms in which City men spoke of that Phil Sheldon with whom they had eaten the sacred bait and quaffed the social moselle in the taverns of Greenwich and Blackwall.

There is a saying current on the Stock Exchange to the effect that the man who fails, and disappears from among his fellows behind a cur-

tain of commercial cloud, is sure to return sooner or later to his old circle, with a moustache and a brougham. For Philip Sheldon there was, however, no coming back. The moustache and the brougham of the chastened and penitent defaulter were not for him. By his deliberate and notorious dishonour he had shut the door against the possibility of return.

It may be supposed that the defaulter knew this, for he did not come back; and since he had no lack of moral courage, he would scarcely have refrained from showing himself once more in his old haunts, if it had been possible for him to face the difficulties of his position.

Time passed, and there came no tidings of the missing man, though a detective was despatched to America in search of him by one vengeful sufferer among the many victims of the fictitious bills-of-exchange. It was supposed that he must inevitably go to America, and thither went his pursuer, but with no result except the expenditure of money and the further exasperation of the vengeful sufferer.

"What will you do with him, if you get him?" asked a philosophical friend of the sufferer. "He has nothing to surrender. Zabulon had a bill-of-sale on his furniture."

"Furniture!" cried the infuriated victim: "I don't want his furniture. I want his flesh and bones. I want to shut him up in Dartmoor Prison, or get him twenty years' hard labour at Portland Island."

"That sort of man would get a ticket-of-leave in less than twelve months," replied the philosophic friend. "I'm afraid you are only throwing good money after bad."

The event proved this gentleman only too able a seer. In the monster city of New York Philip Sheldon had disappeared like a single drop of water flung upon the Atlantic Ocean. There was no trace of him: too intangible for the grasp of international law, he melted into the mass of humanity, only one struggler the more in the great army perpetually fighting life's desperate battle.

From among all those who had known him this man had utterly vanished, and not one sigh of regret followed him in his unknown wanderings—not one creature amongst all those who had taken his hand and given him friendly greeting thought of him kindly, or cared to know whither he went or how he prospered. He had not left in the house that had sheltered him for years so much as a dog to whine at his door or listen for his returning footstep.

This fact, if he had known it or considered it, would have troubled him very little. He had played his game for a certain stake, and had lost it. This he felt, and cursed his own too cautious play as the cause of his defeat. That there were higher stakes for which he might have played an easier game was a fact that never occurred to him. In his philosophy there was indeed nothing higher given to the hopes of man than worldly success, and a dull, cold, prosperous life spent among prosperous acquaintance.

He was gone, and those who remembered him most keenly—Valentine Hawkehurst, Diana Paget,

Ann Woolper—remembered him with a shudder. The old Yorkshirewoman thought of him sometimes as she bent over the little muslin-bedecked cradle where the hope of the Hawkehursts slumbered, and looked round fearfully in the gloaming, half expecting to see his dreaded face glower upon her, dark and threatening, from between the curtains of the window.

It was a belief of all ancient races, nay indeed, a belief still current amongst modern nations, that it is not given to man to behold the beings of another world and to live. The Arab who meets a phantom in the desert goes home to his tent to die. He knows that the hand of doom is upon him. He has seen that upon which, for mortal eyes, it is fatal to look. And it is thus in some measure with those who are admitted within the dark precincts of murder's dread sanctuary. Not swiftly does the curtain fall which has once been lifted from the hidden horrors of that ghastly temple. The revelations of an utterly wicked soul leave a lasting impress upon the mind which

unwillingly becomes recipient of those awful secrets.

The circumstances of Tom Halliday's death and of Charlotte's illness were not to be forgotten by Ann Woolper. The shadow of that dark cruel face, which had lain upon her bosom forty years before, haunted many a peaceful hour of her quiet old age. Her ignorance, and that faint tinge of superstition which generally accompanies ignorance, exaggerated the terror of those dark memories. The thought that Philip Sheldon still lived, still had the power to plot and plan evil against the innocent, was an ever-present source of terror to her. She could not understand that such an element could exist among the forces of evil without fatal result to someone. It seemed to her as if a devil were at large, and there could be neither peace nor security until the evil spirit was exorcised, the baneful presence laid in nethermost depths of unfathomable sea.

These feelings and these fears would scarcely have arisen in the old woman's breast, had she alone been subject to the possible plottings of that

evil nature. For herself she had little fear. Her span of life was nearly ended: very few were the sands that had yet to run: and, for her own sake, she would have cared little if some rough hand had spilt them untimely. But a new interest in life had been given to Mrs. Woolper just as life drew near its close. That peerless child, the son and heir of the Hawkehursts, had been intrusted to the old woman's care: and this infant she loved with an affection much more intense than that which had once made Philip Sheldon so dear to her.

It was by the cradle of this much-treasured child that Ann Woolper nursed her fear of her old master. She knew that he had been counterplotted and beaten ignominiously in that deadly game which he had played so boldly. And she asked herself whether he was the man to submit to such utter defeat without any effort to revenge himself upon those who had helped to compass his failure.

On that night when Charlotte Halliday had lain between life and death, suffering on the one

hand from the effects of a prolonged and gradual course of poison, on the other from the violent measures taken to eliminate that poisonous element from her system,—on that night when the precious life yet trembled in the balance, Ann Woolper had seen murderous looks in the face of the man whom she dared boldly to defy, and who knew in that hour that his ghastly plot was discovered. Even now, secure in a haven of safety, she could not forget that baneful look in Philip Sheldon's eyes. She could not find perfect rest while she knew not where that man might be, or what mischief he might be plotting against those she loved.

Her fears showed themselves in many ways. When she read of dark and vengeful deeds in her newspaper, she thought of her old master, and how, in such or such an act, his fatal hand might reveal itself. He might lie in wait for Valentine some night on the dark road between Charlottenburg and the distant railway-station. She could fancy the young wife's agony of terror as the night wore on, and her husband did not return; the unspeak-

able horror that would come on all that happy household when the news came that its young master had been found on the lonely road slain by some unknown hand. Open utterance to her fears she was too wise to give; but she warned Mr. Hawkehurst of the dangers on that dark road, and besought him to arm himself with a trusty bludgeon wherewith to meet and vanquish any chance assailant. Valentine laughed at her anxious warning; but when Charlotte took up the cry, he was fain to content her by the purchase of a sturdy stick, which he swung cheerily to and fro as he walked homewards in the gloaming, planning a chapter in his new book, and composing powerful and eloquent sentences which eluded his mental grasp when he tried to reduce his evening reverie to pen-and-ink.

"When the air blows fresh across the common, and the distant lights twinkle, and the bright stars peep out in the pale-yellow sky, my language flows as it never does when I sit at my desk, Lotta," he said to his wife. "I feel myself a Swift or a Junius out there; equal to the tack-

ling of any social question that ever arose upon this earth, from the Wood halfpence to the policy of American taxation, and triennial elections. At home I am only Valentine Hawkehurst, with an ever-present consciousness that so many pages of copy are required from me within a given time, and that my son-and-heir is cutting his teeth, and making more fuss about it than *I* ever made about *my* teeth ; and that the man about the water-rate is waiting to see me, please, and is desperately anxious about making up his books; and that I have the dearest wife in Christendom, who opens my door, and puts her pretty head into my room once in half an hour to see how I am getting on, or to ask whether I want any more coals, or to borrow my ink to make up her washing-book."

"You mean, sir, that I prevent your becoming a Junius?" cried Charlotte with an enchanting *moue.*

"Yes, dear. I begin to understand why Swift kept his poor ill-used wife at a respectful distance. She would have made him too happy, if he had allowed her to be on the premises. She would

have given the cruel indignation no chance of lacerating his heart; and such writing as Swift's is only produced by a man whose heart is so lacerated. No, my darling, I shall never be a Swift or a Junius while your pretty head is thrust into my room once or twice an hour; but I may hope to be something better, if bright eyes can inspire bright thoughts, and innocent smiles give birth to pleasant fancies."

Upon this there was the usual little demonstration of affection between this young couple; and Charlotte praised her husband as the most brilliant and admirable of men; after which pleasing flattery she favoured him with a little interesting information about the baby's last tooth, and the contumacious behaviour of the new housemaid, between whom and Mrs. Woolper there had been a species of disagreement, which the Yorkshirewoman described as a "standfurther."

Thus occupied in simple pleasures and simple cares, the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Hawkehurst went on, untroubled by any fear of that crime-burdened wretch whose image haunted the dreams

and meditations of Ann Woolper. For these two Mr. Sheldon was numbered among the dead. To Charlotte the actual truth had never been revealed; but she had been, in the course of time, given to understand that her stepfather had committed some unpardonable sin which must for ever separate him from herself and her mother. She had been told as much as this, and had been told that she must seek to know no more. To this she submitted without questioning.

"I am very sorry for him," she said, "and for mamma."

She concluded that the unpardonable offence must needs have been some sin against her mother; some long-hidden infidelity brought suddenly to light, with all the treachery and falsehood involved therein. She never mentioned her stepfather after this; but in her prayers the sinner was not forgotten.

CHAPTER IX.

ETEOCLES AND POLYNICES.

GEORGE SHELDON went his ways, picking up as good a living as he could from that chivalrous assertion of the rights of the weak, which has been already described; and the thought of his brother's sin-burdened soul troubled him very little. He did think of Tom Halliday: for that last grasp of the honest Yorkshireman's hand, that last look in his old friend's face, were haunting memories which this sharp practitioner had found himself powerless to exorcise. If his brother, after an absence of many years in the remote regions of the East Indies, had come home to his fatherland with a colossal fortune, and the reputation of having strangled a few natives during the process of amassing that fortune, George Sheldon would have welcomed the returning wanderer, and

would, in his own parlance, have "swallowed the natives." A few niggers, more or less, sent untimely to Gehenna, would have seemed scarcely sufficient cause for quarrel with a fraternal and liberally-disposed millionaire. But the circumstances of Tom Halliday's death had brought all the horror of crime and treachery home to the spectator of that deliberate assassination, and had produced such an impression as no other circumstances could have produced on so hard a nature.

It was some satisfaction to George Sheldon to know that his old friend's daughter had found a happy home; and he was apt to take some credit from his own share in his brother's discomfiture. He met Valentine sometimes in the course of his peregrinations in the neighbourhood of the British Museum, and the greeting between the two men was sufficiently cordial; but Mr. Hawkehurst did not invite his old employer to Charlottenburg, and George was able to comprehend that to that household no one bearing the name of Sheldon could be a welcome visitor.

He jogged on comfortably enough in his own way, living in his chambers, and consorting with a few chosen friends and kindred spirits of the jolly-good-fellow class, whom he met at an old-established tavern in the west-central district, and in whose society, and the society of the subscription-ground in the Farringdon-road, he found the *summum bonum* in the way of social intercourse. He did a little speculation upon the turf, and discounted the bills of needy bookmakers, or bought up their bad debts, and thereby gained introductions to the noble patrons of the humble "scums," and pushed his business into new grooves. He had no idea that such an existence was in any way ignoble; nay indeed, when he had paid his rent, and his clerk, and his laundress, and his tavern-score, and "stood glasses round" amongst his friends, he lighted his cigar, and thrust his hands into the depths of his pockets, and paced the flags of Holborn happy in the belief that he had performed the whole duty of man.

"There are men whose business obliges them

to keep up an establishment, and go to church twice a day, and all that kind of thing," he said; "and I daresay they find it pay. My clients don't care a doit where I live or how I spend my Sundays; and I'd rather have five pounds a week and my liberty than the best family connection in the Fields."

The fate of that wretched man, who had dropped out of his old circle and vanished none knew whither, in no manner disturbed the peace of George Sheldon.

"Take my word for it, that gentleman has fallen on his feet," he said, on the only occasion when the fate of Philip was discussed by Valentine and himself. "He's doing well enough somewhere or other, you may depend; but I don't think he'll ever be able to show his nose in London after those bill-transactions. There's a very strong feeling against him on Change. He's looked upon as a discredit to the order, and that sort of thing, you see. It isn't often a member of the House goes to the bad like that. No, I don't think Phil will ever show himself in Lon-

don again; but such a man as that can always find a platform somewhere—"

"And go on to the end of his days unpunished, I suppose," remarked Mr. Hawkehurst with some bitterness.

"Well, yes; I don't see what's to touch him in the future. Of course he could be dropped upon for those bills, if he came in the way of being dropped upon; but, as I said before, he's too deep a card for that."

Thus did George Sheldon dismiss the subject. That his brother was an exile for life from his native land he did not doubt; but he took it for granted that in whatever distant spot of earth Philip had found a refuge, he would there contrive to prosper and to show a bold front in the city of his adoption.

This belief Mr. Sheldon of Gray's-Inn cherished until one snowy Christmas-eve, a year and a half after that event, or series of events, which the lawyer briefly designated "the burst-up at Bayswater."

Bleak and bitter was that December, a De-

cember not long gone by. The heart of the prosperous British nation melted as the heart of one man. The columns of the *Zeus* and the *Diurnal Hermes*, the *Flag* and the *Hesper*, overflowed with the record of subscriptions to charity-funds; and the leaders of the morning journals all preached the same kindly sermon on the same Christian text. Thick lay the snow upon the house-tops; "thick and slab" the greasy slush upon the pavements of crowded thoroughfares; merry the rogues and ragamuffins of the great city. The ideal Christmas of our dreams seemed to have come at last, and the heart of every true Briton rejoiced; while skaters in the parks made merry, and cabmen demanded fabulous sums of helpless wayfarers; and luckless over-worked, under-fed horses stumbled and fell at every turn, and the familiar steep of Holborn was dangerous as Alpine mountain.

To George Sheldon neither the weather nor the Christmas season made much difference. The even current of his life was little disturbed by festive pleasures or dissipations. An extra glass

at his tavern, an invitation to dinner from some friend in the bill-discounting line, were the most exciting events the season was likely to bring him. He saw the shops brighten suddenly with semi-supernal glories of crystallised fruits and gorgeous bonbon-boxes, and he was aware of a kind of movement in the streets that was brisker and gayer than the plodding hurry of everyday life. He stood aside and let the mummeries go by him, and was glad when these Christmas follies were done with, and the law-courts in full swing once more. In the happiest and most innocent days of his youth, Christmas had brought him no more than extraordinary indulgences in the way of eating and drinking, swiftly followed by that dread avenger, the demon of the bilious.

Upon this particular occasion Mr. Sheldon had pledged himself to dine with a horsey publican lately retired from business, and big with all the pride and glory of a "place" at Hornsey.

"Come down and see my place, Sheldon," this gentleman had said. "I don't pretend to do the swell thing; but I force my own pines and

grow my own grapes, and can put as good a dessert on my table as you could buy in Covent Garden for a five-pun' note. That's my missus's fad, that is, and I can afford it; so why shouldn't I do it? You come and eat your Christmas dinner with us, Sheldon. I've got a friend coming that can sing as good a song as Reeves hisself, and might make a fortune, if he wasn't above coming out at one of them music-halls. And I'll give you a bottle of Madeira that you won't match at any nobleman's table, if noblemen's tables was in your line of business, which you and I know they ain't, old fellow."

And then the jolly-good-fellow dug his fat fingers into George Sheldon's ribs, and George accepted the invitation; not with any elation of spirits, but sufficiently pleased to secure a good dinner with a man who promised to be a profitable client, and whose house was within a reasonable cab-fare from the west-central district.

"The cabmen are trying it on, anyhow, just now," thought Mr. Sheldon; "but I don't think they'll try it on with me. And if they do, there's

the Marylebone stage. I'm not afraid of a five-mile walk."

Having accepted this invitation, and thus disposed of his Christmas-day, George Sheldon refrained from the delights of social converse at his tavern on Christmas-eve, and occupied himself with business. His clerk left him at the usual hour; but the master sat, long after dark, writing letters and reading law-papers, while the snow drifted against his windows and whitened the quiet quadrangle below.

He had just laid aside his papers and lighted a cigar, when he was startled by a stealthy knocking at his door. He was not unaccustomed to late visitors, as he was known to live at his chambers, and to work after office-hours; but the knocking of to-night was not the loud rollicking rat-a-tat of his jolly-good-fellow friends or clients. If he had been a student of light literature, and imbued with the ghostly associations of the season, he would have gone to his door expecting to behold a weird figure clothed in the vestments of the last century; or an old woman in ruff and mar-

tingale, whose figure in the flesh had once haunted those legal precincts; or the ghostly semblance of the Baron of Verulam himself, revisiting the glimpses of the moon and the avenue of elms that were planted by his order.

In George Sheldon's nature there was, however, no lurking dread of fiend or phantom. His ideas in connection with ghosts were limited to a white sheet, a broom-stick, and a hollow turnip with a lighted candle inside it; and he would have set down the most awful apparition that ever was revealed to German ghost-seer, with a scornful grin, as a member of the sheet-and-hollow-turnip confraternity.

"I know how it's done," he would have said, if the spectral form had glowered upon him in midnight churchyard or ruined abbey. "You'd better go and try it on somewhere else, my friend."

To a superstitious mind the THING which crept across the dark lobby and dragged itself into the glare of the gas-lighted office might have seemed, indeed, some creature too loathsome for

humanity. A plague-stricken corpse galvanised into a spasmodic life could scarcely have lifted to the light a more awful countenance than that on which George Sheldon looked with mingled anger and disgust.

"What do you want here?" he asked. "Do you take this for the workhouse?"

"No," the creature answered, in a faint hoarse voice; "but I take you for my brother."

"WHAT!" cried George Sheldon aghast.

He bent down and looked at the awful face. Yes, from the cavernous hollows of those sunken cheeks, beneath the shaggy penthouse of those bony brows, the fierce black eyes of Philip Sheldon looked out at him, with a savage glare that he had never seen in them before—even when the savage nature of the man had revealed itself most nakedly—the fierce glare of fever and starvation.

This walking horror, this mass of loathsome rags endued with motion, this living disease, was the sometime prosperous stockbroker, the man whom it had been impossible to think of except furnished with linen of spotless whiteness, and the

glossy broadcloth, and well-made boots, and keyless chronometer, and silk umbrella of commercial success.

"Good God!" exclaimed George, horror-stricken, "is it you?"

"Yes, it's I," answered the creature in his strange husky accents; and the change — nay, indeed, the degradation, of the voice was as complete as the degradation of the man. "Yes, George, it's I; your brother Phil. You're surprised to see me fallen so low in the world, I suppose; but you can't be more surprised than I am myself. I've tried hard enough to hold my head above water. There's scarcely any trade that mortal man ever tried to earn his bread by, that I haven't tried—and failed in. It has been the experience of Fitzgeorge-street over and over again, in every trade and every profession. I started as doctor in Philadelphia, and was doing well;—till —till a patient died—and things went against me. I've been clerk in more offices than you can count on your ten fingers; but there was always something—my employer levanted, or was bankrupt, or

died, or dismissed me. I've been travelling-dentist, auctioneer, commission-agent, tout, pedlar, out yonder; but it all came to the same thing—ruin, starvation, the hospital, or the pauper's ward. I have swept crossings in the city, and camped out in the wilderness among the bears and opossums. One day I thought I'd come home. 'There's George,' I said to myself; 'if I can get money enough to take me across the Atlantic, I shall be all right. George will give me a lift.' I don't stand alone in the world. A man's own flesh and blood won't let him starve—*can't* let him starve. Blood's thicker than water, you know, George. So I came home. I got the money; never you mind how. I needn't tell you what it cost me to scrape half-a-dozen pounds together. When a man's as low down in the world as I am, there's not a shilling he earns that doesn't cost him a drop of his heart's blood; there's not a pound he gets together that isn't bought by the discount of so much of his life. I found money enough for my passage in an emigrant vessel; and here I am, ready for anything. I'll work like your bought

nigger. I'll do the work your clerk does for a quarter of his wages. I'll sweep out your office, and run errands for you. You'll give me something to keep body and soul together, won't you, George?"

Nothing could be more utterly abject than the tone of this most abject wretch.

This man, who in prosperity had been the very personification of hardness and insolence, was transformed into a grovelling, cringing supplicant, ready to lie face downward in the dust beneath the feet of that brother whose patronage, or charity, he besought.

Mr. Sheldon the younger contemplated the supplicant with looks of undisguised gratification. He walked a few paces backward from the spot where his brother had fallen, in a half-sitting, half-crouching attitude, and where he remained, hugging himself in his rags, too abject to be acutely conscious of his degradation. A year ago and he would have held himself obstinately aloof from all old associations, and would have declared himself ready to face starvation, rather than accept,

still less supplicate, relief from his younger brother. The events of that one year had involved alternations and convulsions that change a year into a cycle. He had faced starvation; he had walked with hunger for his travelling-companion; he had lain down night after night in such lairs as the tramp can find for his refuge, with sickness and pain for his bedfellows. The crucible through which he had passed had left in him no more of humanity than its outward semblance, and scarcely that; for when the moral man sinks to the level of the beasts of prey, the physical man undergoes an assimilative process only less marked than that which transforms the mental nature.

For six months this man had lived by fawning upon or threatening his fellow-men; by violence or craft; by the degradation of the vagrant or the audacity of the thief. There is no limit to man's capacity for infamy which he had not touched. Vilest amongst the vile, he had been cast forth from the haunts of beggars and reprobates, as no fitting company for honourable thieves or cadgers of good repute.

George Sheldon seated himself astride upon a chair, and, with his folded arms resting on the back of it, contemplated this hideous spectacle. It was a picture that he had never thought to see, and the feeling with which he surveyed it was not unmingled with pleasure.

"When you rode me rough-shod, my friend, I used to think how I should enjoy taking my change out of you," he said; "but I never thought I should have such an opportunity as this—never, by Jove! I thought you would ride the high horse to the end of the journey; I didn't think your steed would land you in the gutter. And so you've tried every move, have you?—tumbled upon every platform?—and you've found all your cleverness no go upon the other side of the three thousand miles of everlasting wet, as my Yankee friends call the Atlantic; and you've come back whining to me, and I'm to help you, am I, and to give you a fresh start in life, I suppose, and make you my clerk, or my junior partner, eh?—that would be better. Messrs. Sheldon and Sheldon wouldn't look bad on my door. That's about

what you mean when you talk of blood being thicker than water, isn't it?"

The abject wretch who had once been Philip Sheldon felt that his brother was trifling with him, savouring to the last drop that cup of triumph which the chances of fortune had offered to his lips.

"Don't play the fool with me, George," he said, piteously. "I don't ask you much—a crust of bread, a corner to sleep in, and a cast-off suit of clothes: that's not much for one brother to ask of another."

"Perhaps not," replied George Sheldon; "but it's a great deal for you to ask of me. You've had your turn, Phil; and you made the most of it, and contrived to keep me at arm's length. My turn has come at last, and you may depend upon it I shall contrive now to keep *you* at arm's length."

The vagrant stared at him aghast. Here he had felt secure of food and shelter; and he had endured miseries and deprivations that reduce a man to a state in which food and shelter seem

to constitute the supreme good that can be obtained in this life.

"You won't refuse to do something for me, George," he whined piteously.

"I will do nothing for you. Do you hear that, my man? Nothing! You taught me that blood is *not* thicker than water twelve years ago, when you married Tom Halliday's widow, and drew your purse-strings, after flinging me a beggarly hundred as you'd throw a bone to a dog. You made me understand that was all I should ever get out of your brotherly love, or your fear of my telling the world *what I knew*. You gave me a dinner now and then, because it suited you to keep your eye upon me; and you had generally some piece of dirty work on hand that made the advice of a sharp practitioner like me uncommonly useful to you. I don't believe that you ever gave me so much as a dinner that you didn't take payment for in meal or in malt. Don't come howling here now, trying to persuade me that blood *is* thicker than water, or that brotherhood means anything more than the accident of

birth. And now I've said all I have to say; and the sooner you make yourself scarce, the better for both of us."

"George!" cried the miserable suppliant, clasping his bony hands convulsively, and whimpering as he had whimpered when he begged his bread in the streets of New York, "you can't mean to turn me out of doors on such a night. Look at me. It was as much as I could do to crawl to this room. I have walked every step of the way from Liverpool; my wretched limbs have been frost-bitten, and ulcered, and bruised, and racked with rheumatism, and bent double with cramp. I came over in an emigrant vessel, with a herd of miserable creatures who had tried their luck on the other side of the Atlantic, and had failed, like me, and were coming home to their native workhouses. You don't know what some of your emigrant ships are, perhaps. People talk about the Black Hole of Calcutta, and the Middle Passage; but let them try the cabin of an emigrant vessel, and they'll have a pretty fair idea of what human beings

have to suffer when Poverty drives the ship. I landed in Liverpool with half-a-dollar in my pocket, and I've had neither decent food nor decent shelter since I landed. Give me some hole to lie in, George, till you can get me an order for the nearest hospital. It's a toss-up whether I ever come out of it."

"Do you think I'd sleep under the roof that sheltered *you?*" cried George.

"Why not?"

"Why not! Because I'm afraid of you. Because I'd as soon have a cobra for my companion, or a wolf for my bedfellow. I know you. I've seen what you can do, and how you can do it. And if you could do those things when the only pressure upon you was one that you could have cast off by going through the *Gazette*, what would you *not* do now when you are as desperate as a famished wolf, and governed by no better law than that which governs a wolf—the law of self-preservation? Am I to trust a tiger because he tells me he is hungry? No, Phil Sheldon; neither will I trust you."

"You will give me some money—enough to keep me alive for a week or two."

"Not one sixpence. I'll establish no precedent; I'll acknowledge no tie between us. You'd better march. I don't want to send for a policeman; but if you won't go quietly, you must do the other thing."

"You mean that?"

"Most emphatically yes."

"I didn't think it was in you to be so hard upon me," faltered the wretch in that faint hoarse voice which had grown fainter and hoarser during this interview.

"Did you think that I would trust you?" cried George. "Trust *you!* You call me hard because I won't give you a corner to lie in. And if I did, you would creep out of your corner to poison me, or cut my throat. You would crawl into my room in the dead of the night and put a pillow over my face, and kneel upon it till you'd done the trick for *me;* and then you'd walk off with as much as you could carry, and begin the same kind of work over again with someone

else. I tell you, Mr. Phil Sheldon, I will hold no intercourse with you. You've escaped hanging, but there's something that's worse than hanging, to my mind, and that is the state of a man whom nobody will trust. You've come to that; and if you had a spark of gentlemanly feeling, you'd have bought twopennyworth of rope and hung yourself rather than come cringing to me."

"Suppose I don't cringe," said the outcast, dropping the fawning tone of the mendicant for the threatening ferocity of the social wolf; "you'd better give me a trifle to keep body and soul together for the next few weeks. I'm a desperate man, George! You and I are alone up here. You are pretty sure to have ready-money about you. And there's your watch; that's worth something. I didn't come here to go away empty-handed. AND I WON'T!"

He sprang to his feet, and in the next moment the lawyer heard the sharp clicking noise made by the opening of a clasp-knife.

"O," cried he, "that's what you want, is it!"

He bent over his desk, with his eyes fixed on those other evil eyes that still retained some likeness to his own, and with his left arm raised in a boxer's defensive attitude, to guard his head, while his right hand groped for something in a drawer. It was a moment's work. Philip had seized that uplifted left arm, and was hanging on to it like a cat, with his knife between his teeth, when George clapped the muzzle of a revolver to his brow.

"There are plenty of wild-beasts in London besides you," he said, "and I am not such a fool as to be without the means of settling a chance visitor of your sort. Drop your knife, and march."

The outcast dropped his knife submissively. He was too weak for anything more than a spasmodic violence.

"Take your pistol away from my head," he whined.

"Certainly, when you are outside my door."

"You might give me a handful of silver, George. I haven't a week's life left in me."

"All the better for society if you hadn't an

hour's life in you. Be off! I'm tired of holding this revolver to your head, and I don't mean to let it go till you're off my premises."

Philip saw that there was no hope. Food and shelter were all he had hoped for; but even these blessings were not for him. He backed out of the office, closely followed by George, holding the muzzle of the revolver within an inch or so of the fraternal brains. Upon the threshold only did he pause.

"Tell me one thing," he said. "You won't give me sixpence to buy a loaf of bread, or a glass of gin. Give me one scrap of comfort. It need cost you nothing. Tell me something bad of Valentine Hawkehurst: that he's gone to the dogs, or drowned himself; that his wife has run away from him, or his house been burned to the ground. Tell me that he's had a taste of my luck; and that Ann Woolper has died in a workhouse. It will be as good as meat and drink to me, and it will cost you nothing."

"If I told you anything of the kind, I should tell you a lie. Val Hawkehurst is doing uncom-

monly well, and has got one of the prettiest little boxes between Wimbledon and Kingston. Ann Woolper lives with them, and is in better feather than she ever was in your time."

With this, Mr. Sheldon of Gray's-Inn pushed his brother out on to the staircase, and shut his door. Philip sat upon the stairs, and drew his rags together a little, and rubbed his wretched limbs, while the bolts and chains whereby the lawyer defended his citadel clanked close behind him.

"I wonder whether he'll pay Hawkehurst a visit," thought George, as he bolted his door; and he had a kind of grim satisfaction in the idea that Valentine's Christmas peace might be disturbed by the advent of that grisly visitor.

CHAPTER X.

"ACCORDING TO THEIR DEEDS."

"BETWEEN Wimbledon and Kingston," muttered the tramp. "If I can drag myself as far as that, I'll go there this night."

He went down stairs and out into the pitiless cold and snow, and made his way down Fetter-lane, and across Blackfriars-bridge to the Surrey side of the water, stopping to beg here and there.

Upon this snowy Christmas night there were plenty of people abroad; and amongst them Philip Sheldon found pitying matrons, who explored the depths of their capacious pockets to find him a halfpenny, and good-natured young men, who flung the "copper" he besought with piteous professional whine.

When he had collected the price of a glass

of gin, he went into the first public-house he came to, and spent his money. He was too ill to stay the cravings of his stomach with substantial food. Gin gave him temporary warmth and temporary strength, and enabled him to push on vigorously for a little while; and then came dreary periods of faintness and exhaustion, in which every step was sheer pain and weariness.

Something of his old self, some remnant of that hard strength of purpose which had once characterised him, remained with him still, utterly fallen and brutalised as he was. As a savage creature of the jungle might pursue a given course, pushing always onward to that camp or village whence the scent of human flesh and blood was wafted to his quivering nostrils, so Philip Sheldon pushed on towards the dwelling-place of that man and that woman whom of all creatures upon this earth he most savagely hated.

"There's nothing left for me but to turn housebreaker," he said to himself; "and the first house I'll try my hand upon shall be Valentine Hawkehurst's."

The idea of violence in such a creature was the idea of a madman. Weapon he had none, nor the physical strength that would have enabled him to grapple with a boy of twelve years old. Half intoxicated with the spirits he had consumed on his long tramp, half delirious with fever, he had a vague notion that he could make an entrance into some ill-defended house under cover of night, and steal something that should procure him food and shelter. And let the house be Valentine Hawkehurst's, the man who had baffled his plans and crushed him! If blood must be shed, let the blood be his! Never was man better primed for murder than the man who tramped across Wimbledon Common at eleven o'clock this night, with the snow drifting against his face, and his limbs shaken every now and then by an ague-fit.

Happily for the interests of society, his hand lacked the power to execute that iniquity which his heart willed.

He reached a little wayside inn near the Robin Hood gate of Richmond Park, just as the shutters

were being closed, and asked a man if any one of the name of Hawkehurst lived in that neighbourhood.

"What do *you* want with Mr. Hawkehurst?" asked the man contemptuously.

"I've got a letter for him."

"Have you? A begging letter, I should think, from the look of you."

"No; it's a business letter. You'd better show me where he lives, if he's a customer of yours. The business is particular."

"Is it? You're a queer kind of messenger to trust with particular business. Mr. Hawkehurst's house is the third you come to on the opposite side of the way. But I don't suppose you'll find anybody up as late as this. Their lights are out by eleven, in a general way."

The third house on the opposite side of the road was half a mile distant from the little inn. Lights shone bright in the lower windows as the tramp dragged his tired limbs to the stout oaken gate. The gate was fastened only by a latch, and offered no resistance to the intruder. He crept

with stealthy footsteps along the smooth gravel-walk, sheltered by dark laurels, on which the light flashed cheerily from those bright windows. Sounds of laughter and of music pealed out upon the wintry air. Shadows flitted across the blinds of the broad bay windows. Philip Sheldon crept into a sheltered nook beside the rustic porch, and sank down exhausted in the shadow of the laurels.

He sat there in a kind of stupor. He had lost the power of thought, somehow, on that dreary journey. It seemed almost as if he had left some portion of his being out yonder in the cold and darkness. He had difficulty in remembering why he had come to this place, and what that deed was which he meant to do.

"Hawkehurst," he muttered to himself—"Hawkehurst, the man who leagued against me with Jedd! I swore to be even with him if ever I found the opportunity—if ever! And George refused me a few shillings; my brother, my only brother, refused to stand my friend!"

Hawkehurst and George—his only brother—

the images of these two men floated confusedly in his brain: he could scarcely separate them. Sometimes it seemed to him that he was still sitting outside his brother's door, on the staircase in Gray's-Inn, hugging himself in his rags, and cursing his unnatural kinsman's cruelty; then in the next moment he remembered where he was, and breathed bitter curses upon that unconscious enemy whose laugh pealed out every now and then amid a chorus of light-hearted laughter.

There was a little Christmas party at Charlottenburg. Two flies were waiting in the laurel-avenue to convey Mr. Hawkehurst's guests to distant abodes. The door was opened presently, and all the bustle of departure made itself heard by that wretched wayfarer who found it so difficult to keep his hold upon the consciousness of these things.

"What is it?" he said to himself—"a party! Hawkehurst has been giving a party."

He had lived through too much degradation, he had descended into too deep a gulf of wretchedness, to be conscious of the contrast between

his present situation and his position in those days when *he* had played the host, and seen handsome carriages bear prosperous guests away from his door. In that cycle of misery which he had endured, these things and the memory of them had faded from him as completely as if they had been obliterated by the passage of a century. The hapless wretch tried to give sustained attention to all the animated discussion that attended the departure of the merry guests. Half-a-dozen people seemed to be talking at once. Valentine was giving his friends counsel about the way home.

"You'll keep to the lower road, you know, Fred. Lawsley's cab can follow yours. You came a couple of miles out of your way. And tell that fellow Battersea-bridge is a mistake."

And then followed Charlotte's friendly questioning about wraps, and hoods, and comforters, and other feminine gear.

"And when are you coming to dine at Fulham?" cried one voice.

"I shall certainly get those quadrilles of Offenbach's," said another.

"How delightfully Mr. Lawsley sang that song of Santley's!"

And anon a chorus of "Never enjoyed myself more!" "Most delightful evening!" "Pray don't come out in the cold." "Thanks; well, yes, yours are always capital." "No, I won't light up till I'm on the road." "Give my book a lift in the *D. H.*, eh, old fellow?" "Are you *quite* sure that shawl is warm enough?" "Take a rug for your feet." "Thanks, no." "Good-night." "See you on Tuesday." "Don't forget the box for D. L." "All right, old fellow!" "Lower-road, Rochampton-lane, Putney-bridge. Good-night."

Among the confusion of voices Philip Sheldon had recognised more than one voice that was familiar to him. There were Charlotte's gentle tones, and Valentine's hearty barytone, and another that he knew.

Diana Paget! Yes, it was her voice. Diana Paget, whom he had cause to hate for her interference with his affairs.

"A beggar," he muttered to himself, "and the daughter of a beggar! She was a nice young lady to set herself in opposition to the man who gave her a home."

The vehicles drove away, but there was still a little group in the rustic porch. Valentine and Charlotte, with Monsieur and Madame Lenoble, who had come to spend their Christmas with their English friends.

"How we have been gay this evening!" cried Gustave. "There is nothing like your English interior for that which you call the comfortable, the jolly, you others. Thy friends are the jollity itself, Hawkehurst. And our acting charades, when that we all talked at once, and with a such emphasis on the word we would make to know. Was it not that our spectators were cunning to divine the words? And your friend Lawsley—it is a mixture of Got and Sanson. It is a true genius. Think, then, Diane, while we were amusing ourselves, our girls were at the midnight mass at the Sacré Cœur? Dear pious children, their innocent prayers ascended towards the hea-

vens for we who are absent. Come, Madame Hawkehurst, Diane, it makes cold."

"But we are sheltered here. And the stars are so bright after the snow," said Charlotte. "Do you remember the Christmas-day you spent at the Lawn, Valentine, when we walked in Kensington Gardens together, just when we were first engaged?" the young wife added shyly.

"Do I not remember? It was the first time the holiness of Christmas came home to my heart. And now let us go back to the drawing-room, and sit round the fire, and tell ghost-stories. Lenoble shall give us the legends of Côtenoir."

"Valentine," murmured Charlotte, "do you know that it is nearly one o'clock?"

"And we must put in an appearance at church to-morrow morning. And Lenoble has to walk to Kingston to early mass. We will postpone our ghost-stories to New-Year's eve. And Lenoble shall read Tennyson's *New Year*, to demonstrate his improvement in the English language. Lead the way, Mrs. Hawkehurst; your obedient slave obeys. Mamma is waiting for us

in the drawing-room, marvelling at our delay, no doubt. And Nancy Woolper stalks ghost-like through the house, oppressed by the awful responsibility of to-morrow's pudding."

Anon came a clanking of bolts and bars; and Philip Sheldon, for the second time that night, heard a door shut against him. As the voices died away, his consciousness of external things died with them. He fancied himself on the Gray's-Inn staircase.

"Don't be so hard upon me, George," he muttered faintly. "If my own kith and kin turn against me, whom shall I look to?"

Mrs. Woolper opened the door early next day, when night was yet at odds with morning. All through the night the silent snow-flakes had been falling thick and fast; and they had woven the shroud of Philip Sheldon. The woman who had watched his infant slumbers forty years before, was the first to look upon him in that deeper sleep, of whose waking we know so little. It was not until she had looked long and closely at the

dead face that she knew why it was that the aspect of that countenance had affected her with so strange a pang. She did recognise that altered wretch, and kept her counsel.

Before the bells rang for morning service the tramp was lying in the dead-house of Kingston Union, whither he had been conveyed very quietly in the early morning, unknown to anyone but the constable who superintended the removal, and the servants of Mr. Hawkehurst's household. Only the next day did Ann Woolper tell Valentine what had happened. There was to be an inquest. It would be well that someone should identify the dead man, and establish the fact of Philip Sheldon's decease.

Valentine was able to do this unaided. He attended the inquest, and made arrangements for the outcast's decent burial; and in due course he gave Mrs. Sheldon notice of her freedom.

Beyond that nameless grave, whose fancy shall dare follow Philip Sheldon? He died and made no sign. And in the last dread day, when the

dead, small and great, from the sea and from the grave, press together at the foot of the great white Throne, and the books of doom are opened; when above shines the city whose light is the glory of God, and below yawns the lake of fire, what voice shall plead for Philip Sheldon, what entreating cry shall Pity send forth that sentence against him may be stayed?

Surely none; unless it issue from the lips of that one confiding friend, whose last words upon earth thanked and blessed him, and whose long agonies he watched with unshaken purpose, conscious that in every convulsive change in the familiar face, and every pang that shook the stalwart form, he saw the result of his own work.

Perhaps at that dread Judgment Day, when every other tongue is silent, the voice of Tom Halliday may be heard pleading for the man who murdered him.

THE END.

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